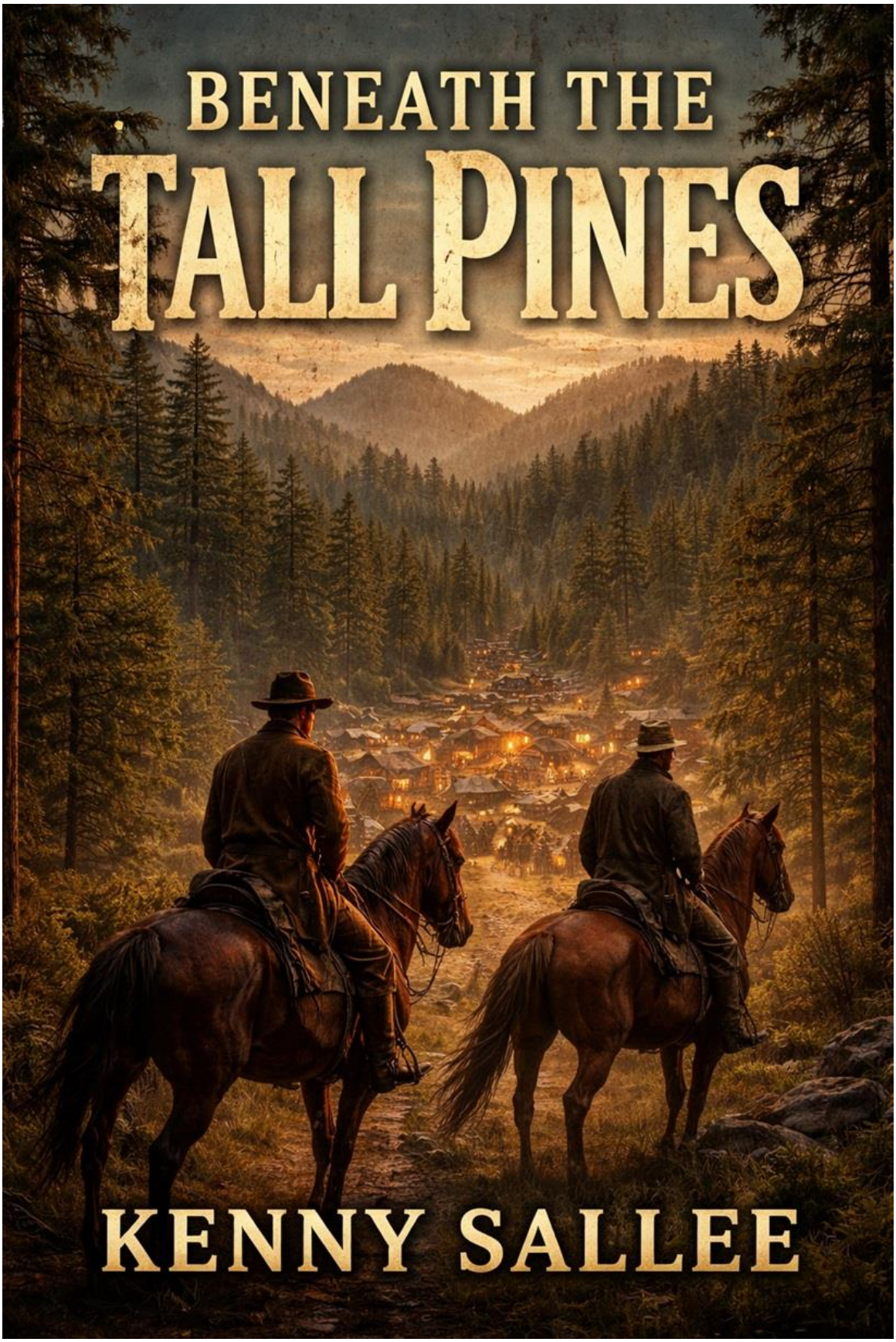
BENEATH THE
TALL PINES
KENNY SALLEE

Beneath the Tall Pines

BENEATH THE TALL PINES

A Historical Western Novel

by

Kenny Sallee, ThM

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This is a work of historical fiction. Certain historical figures, places, and events are portrayed within a fictional narrative. Some names, characters, incidents, dialogue, and scenes are the product of the author's imagination, while others are used fictitiously for dramatic purposes.

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For Ginny

with love and gratitude,
for sharing the road,
the stories,
and the places that stay with us

Better is a little with righteousness
than great revenues without right.

— Proverbs 16:8

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PROLOGUE

In the year when gold first set men climbing into those high New Mexico mountains like ants upon a carcass, the place was known by two names. Some called it Birchville, after the man whose discovery had set the whole wilderness whispering. Others, especially those who had long known the country better than the newcomers, called it Pinos Altos—the Tall Pines—for the dark timber that crowned the ridges and stood watch over the narrow creek and rocky gulches below. In time the older name would prove the truer one, for men may name a camp after themselves, yet the land keeps its own counsel and remembers what it has always been.

It was a hard country, handsome in the way of stern things. The wind came clean through the pines, the nights bit sharp even after warm days, and the mountains rose above seven thousand feet, as if heaven itself had set them there to keep foolish men from meddling too freely. Yet meddle they did. Once word spread that color had been found in Bear Creek, wagons began to grind up the rough approaches, pack animals bent under sacks of flour and barrels of whiskey, and men of every stripe came pressing in—miners, gamblers, merchants, drifters, and those solemn speculators who never lifted a pick if they could profit by another man's labor instead. Cabins of log and adobe rose in haste. Canvas roofs flapped over false-front stores. Arrastras groaned over crushed ore. Trees that had stood through long winters fell to axe and saw, and a camp was born almost in a night.

Among the first to understand what such a camp required were Samuel G. Bean and his brother Roy. They set up on Main Street, if that muddy and rutted line of buildings deserved so fine a name, and dealt in merchandise and liquors for all who had dust in their pokes and thirst in their throats. There was talk that a man might find most anything at the Beans' place if he came prepared to pay for it: a bottle and a side of bacon, news from Mesilla, a gaming table, or the sharp knock of billiard balls on a proper table hauled into the mountains at no little effort. Sam Bean was the steadier article, so men said—older, seasoned, and possessed of that frontier caution which comes of having lived long enough to know that luck is a false friend. Roy was of another temper altogether: quick with a smile, quicker with anger, and already carrying that restless spark which would later make him a figure much enlarged by story.

Not far off, other houses of trade and drink gave the camp its rough pulse, and in time there would stand on that street the Buckhorn, with its thick adobe walls and its brave attempt at refinement in so wild a quarter—a saloon where men drank against loneliness and danger, and an opera house where they might pretend, for an evening, that civilization had come up the mountain with them. For such is the manner of frontier towns: they build a stage before they have built peace, and set fiddles to playing while fear still sleeps with its boots on.

Yet if the camp swelled with confidence, the country around it remained older than all their boasts. These mountains were no empty waste awaiting discovery, no blank place on a map for miners and merchants to divide between them. The streams, ridges, passes, and hunting grounds belonged already to the Apache, who had known them not as rumor nor fortune, but as homeland. They knew where the springs hid in dry weather, where game crossed, where the ridges offered watch over the

valleys, and where a man might travel unseen from timber into stone. They saw what the newcomers either could not or would not see: that each felled pine, each loaded mule train, each new cabin roofed against the weather was not merely a sign of passing intrusion, but of men who meant to remain. To the miners it was enterprise. To the Apache it was encroachment. To defend such ground was no villainy, but duty.

So from the first there lay over Birchville—over Pinos Altos—a strain like that of a drawn rawhide rope, tight enough that any careless motion might set it singing. In the saloons men boasted of strikes to come and fortunes nearly within reach. At the gaming tables they laughed too loudly. Rifles stood within arm's reach. Horses remained saddled longer than need required. Men spoke of danger in lowered voices, though many had come west precisely because they believed danger was a price another fellow would pay. The older hands watched the timber line more closely than the cards in their own fingers. The wiser sort understood that gold had brought them into the mountains, but gold would not decide whether they kept their foothold there.

And thus the camp stood in its first rude season: half promise, half trespass; half merchant's dream, half fortress. Beneath the tall pines, where men came seeking wealth in the earth, there was already gathering a reckoning greater than any nugget or claim. Sam Bean counted kegs and crates. Roy Bean poured whiskey and watched faces. Miners bent over pans and rockers, believing the mountain hid treasure intended for their taking. But the land itself had not yielded consent, and the Apache, who had seen strangers come deeper into their country with every passing month, had not forgotten what was theirs to protect. Before long, all these men—merchant and miner, drifter and warrior alike—would learn that in the high country of Pinos Altos, a man might come hunting gold and instead find himself measured by the worth of his courage, the weight of his choices, and the judgment of the land beneath his feet.

CHAPTER ONE

Into the Tall Pines

When Samuel G. Bean first drew rein upon the rise above the camp and looked down into the gulch, he said nothing for a long while.

That was his way. Men of Roy's sort, and there are always plenty of them wherever whiskey, money, and uncertainty begin running together, are apt to fill silence with words merely because they cannot bear to be left alone with their own thoughts. But Sam Bean had survived too much frontier country to spend language cheaply. He sat his horse easy, one hand on the saddle horn, and measured the place below with the narrowed gaze of a man who knew profit seldom rode without hazard in the same saddle.

The settlement had sprung up in the fashion of gold camps everywhere and almost nothing else in this world. A short while earlier it had been no more, to the minds of newcomers, than a creek in the mountains and a rumor among prospectors. But the country had not been nameless or empty before the Americans arrived with pans, rifles, and the old conviction that discovery made a thing available. Long before men called it Birchville, long before they spoke of claims and color in Bear Creek, the ridges, water, and tall pines had already belonged to a larger order of life and memory than the camp below cared to admit.

Roy Bean spat over his horse's shoulder and grinned.

"Well," said he, "if that don't look like fortune with her dress half off, then I never saw the lady."

Sam let the corner of his mouth move, which in him passed for amusement.

"It looks to me," he answered, "like a camp where every man's in a hurry to get rich before his bacon gives out."

Roy laughed aloud at that, for he had the quick laughter of a man who preferred wit to wisdom when wit would serve him first.

"There's money there all the same," he said. "You can smell it."

"I smell pine smoke, mule sweat, wet dirt, and fools," Sam replied. "Gold don't have much scent to it till it changes hands."

Below them, Birchville—or Pinos Altos, as more people were beginning to call it by the older Spanish name—lay under the late light in all its rude ambition. Cabins of plank and log stood beside tents, brush shelters, rough sheds, and fresh adobe walls still pale from construction. Thin smoke climbed out of cookfires and low chimneys and drifted blue among the pines. Mules brayed. Hammers struck. Someone down by the creek shouted over the groan of an arrastra turning on raw ore. The main track that men had already begun to dignify as Main Street showed deep ruts, boot prints, spilled meal, and the first signs of traffic too constant for the ground to forget.

The mountains rose over it all in dark ranks, solemn and indifferent. Tall pines lined the ridges, and the air there carried at once the sweetness of resin and the hard clean promise of cold country. A man might look on it and feel both tempted and warned.

Roy looked long enough to see only the temptation.

"There's our future," he said. "Store, bottles, tobacco, a table, cards, news from below, a little style in the wilderness, and every dusty fool in camp obliged to come through our door before the week's done."

Sam still watched the whole of it.

"There'll be trade," he said. "But a place can be profitable and unsound at the same time. Most boom camps are."

Roy tilted his hat back and studied him sidelong.

"You ever see one that wasn't?"

"For the first week? No. After that, they begin telling on themselves."

He nudged his horse forward and the two of them started down.

As they entered the camp, heads turned as they always do in a new place. Miners looked up from the creek. Teamsters paused at wagon tongues. A gambler in a black coat leaned with interest beneath a canvas awning and watched them pass as if weighing what sort of men they were and how long before one or the other proved useful. Two Mexican laborers led a string of burros packed with meal and tools. A woman carrying water stopped beside a cookfire and shifted her child to her other hip without taking her eyes off the newcomers.

Sam noticed all of it, including what the camp did not say aloud. Too many men wore sidearms within easy reach. Too many horses were kept saddled longer than convenience required. Too many glances ran not only along the street but toward the timber above it. The place had the noise of opportunity, but also the posture of men who knew the ground around them did not belong naturally to their kind of settlement.

Roy noticed instead the liveliness of it—the rough commerce, the tension, the possibility. Such men are often most at home where the world is only half assembled.

Their building stood near the middle of the street, a board-fronted place with room enough for store shelves, a counter, and a saloon side to the front, and with a rear room for stock, accounts, and whatever privacy the camp might permit. Piles of lumber lay beside it. A wagon half-unloaded stood before the door. The whole structure smelled of fresh-cut timber and unfinished intention.

"There she is," Roy said. "And by Saturday she'll be the finest room in the district."

"She'll be a room," Sam answered, climbing down. "Whether she becomes a trap, a refuge, or a business depends on who keeps it."

Roy laughed and swung out of the saddle.

"A thing may be two or three at once."

"Yes," Sam said. "That is often the trouble."

A broad-shouldered carpenter came out wiping sawdust from his beard.

"You Bean?" he asked.

"Sam Bean."

The man nodded toward the doorway. "Frame'll hold. Roof by dark if the camp lets us work in peace."

"Does it ever?"

The carpenter gave him a look somewhere between humor and warning.

"Not so far."

Roy handed off the reins to a freckled boy who had appeared from nowhere, as boys do in camps where movement itself is a summons.

"And the billiard table?" Roy asked.

The carpenter snorted. "You are the one wants civilization dragged uphill by ox teams. I only build the floor under it."

Roy watched him go and smiled.

"You hear that? Civilization."

Sam looked toward the timber beyond the last cabins.

"A camp's first mistake is often deciding too soon what it has become."

They spent the rest of the afternoon unloading stock. Crates of tobacco, flour, coffee, powder, lead, boots, lamp chimneys, rope, bacon, candles, and bottles passed from wagon to doorway in steady order. Roy worked, though with more flourish than necessity, trading easy words with anyone likely to become future custom. Sam counted, sorted, and observed.

By late afternoon the room had begun to take shape. Shelves lined one wall. Bottles stood catching the dimmer light. A keg served for a table until a proper one could be found. The billiard table, to Roy's immense satisfaction, was at last brought inside piece by piece, each piece treated by him as if the thing were some altar to order in the wilderness.

"There," he said when the last section was in. "That's the making of a town."

Sam looked from the green cloth to the rifles leaning in the corner, then to the street where three men had paused to stare upward toward the north slope at something unseen.

"No," he said. "Only the making of appearances."

Roy was about to answer when a rider came into camp at speed from the higher trail, his pony lathered and his eyes moving sharply from roof to roof before finding the cluster of men in the street.

"Any of you know where I can find the alcalde?" he called.

A few laughed. Somebody shouted back, "Find the gold first. Then appoint one."

The rider did not smile.

"I came through sign above the western draw," he said. "Fresh."

The street changed without any signal being given. Voices lowered. A hand moved closer to a holster. The blacksmith stopped hammering. The woman at the cookfire drew her child a little closer.

Roy glanced toward the slope.

"Apache sign?"

The rider nodded once.

"More than one."

No one cried out. Yet the whole camp heard it.

Sam said, "How many?"

The rider shook his head. "Enough to know we were noticed."

That was the phrase that stayed with Sam: not attacked, not charged, but noticed.

To the men in the street, the hills and draws were space around a mining camp. To those who belonged to the country, the camp itself was the intrusion.

Roy looked from the rider to the pines darkening above the ridge.

"Well," he said after a moment, though more quietly than before, "there's your caution furnished in person."

Sam gave him a brief glance. It was not approval exactly, but it was not correction either.

As evening came on, the Beans' place opened.

The first customers arrived almost before the last crate had been set straight. A Cornish miner with clay on his boots bought tobacco and a drink. A freighter asked after coffee and rumor in the same breath. Two gamblers came only to see whether the room would hold together long enough to be worth cultivating. The billiard table drew immediate interest from men who had not seen one in months and from others who had seen one only in towns grander than Birchville was ever likely to become.

Roy moved among them with ready ease. He laughed, poured, listened, remembered names quickly, and set the room turning as if he had been waiting all his life to furnish this exact space. Sam stood nearer the store side, taking money, measuring what kind of camp this would prove, and noticing that the men most cheerful in drink were often the same men who kept one eye on the door.

By full dark the room hummed properly.

Outside, the mountains disappeared into one mass of timber and night. The street lamps and doorway lights of the camp were few and uncertain. Beyond the glow, the country lay unclaimed by anything men below had said over whiskey or claims.

Roy came to the door with a glass in hand and stood beside Sam.

"Well?" he said. "Still only appearances?"

Sam looked out toward the dark ridge.

"For now," he answered. "That is what most camps are in their opening days. The question is what shows through when the first appearance is tested."

Roy leaned one shoulder against the frame.

"And what do you think will show through here?"

Sam listened a moment to the room behind them, the street before them, and the deep stillness beyond the last cabin.

"Whatever was here before we arrived," he said.

Roy did not answer at once.

Then, more subdued than his usual manner, he said, "That may be the truest welcome we've had."

CHAPTER TWO

A Watch in the Timber

Morning came sharp and pale over Birchville, with frost on the wagon tongues and a bitter clearness in the air that made the mountains seem both nearer and more watchful than they had by lamplight.

Sam Bean was up before the mule bells. He had slept little, being a man who never wholly surrendered himself to sleep in a new place, and when he stepped outside the store he found the street empty save for a dog nosing among wood chips and a teamster kneeling over embers, breathing patiently into them until a little flame took.

The camp looked smaller by daylight. Worse built. More exposed. The main line of cabins and sheds appeared almost accidental against the larger country around them. The timber above town stood close and dark. The creek ran cold below, and mist lay thin along its edge.

Roy came out some moments later, hat in hand, hair not yet made decent by water.

"You look solemn enough to preach," he said.

"I'm counting what can go wrong."

Roy looked up and down the street. "At this hour?"

Sam answered, "That is when most things begin."

Before Roy could reply, a shout came from farther up the road. Then another, harsher and more urgent. Men emerged at once from doors and tents fastening belts, pulling on boots, and reaching as naturally for rifles as for hats.

A miner came running bareheaded, one suspender loose, face white beneath the dust.

"They took horses," he cried. "Three head from Miller's lot."

Within moments the street was full.

"Which way?"

"How long?"

"Who saw it?"

The miner turned and pointed toward the western trees. "Tracks lead up the draw."

Somebody said "Apache" at once, and the word passed quickly, but not everyone in the street used it with the same meaning. For some it meant enemy entire and permanent. For others it meant what should already have been understood: that the camp had entered a country where its presence was not accepted as harmless.

Miller himself arrived in a fury, thick-necked and red-handed, cursing hard enough to carry to the next rise.

"Those horses are worth more than every ounce I've washed this month," he roared. "I want twenty men and I want them now."

An older miner near the corral said, "You want somebody who can read sign before you go chasing into country that knows you better than you know it."

The sensible remark won little favor among the inflamed.

Then the camp's attention shifted. On the slope above the creek, where the timber thinned for a moment between young pines, a figure stood plainly visible.

He stood in the morning light without crouching or haste, rifle easy in the crook of one arm, blanket back from one shoulder. He was not concealed because he had not chosen to be. He stood looking down at the camp as a man looks upon something newly built in a place he has known much longer than the builders.

A hush passed through Birchville.

Several rifles lifted half an inch.

"Don't fire," Sam said, not loudly, but with enough steadiness that men near him heard the sense of it before their fear outran them.

The watcher did not move.

Roy narrowed his eyes. "He means to be seen."

"Yes," said Sam. "That is the point."

The figure remained only a short while longer. Then he turned and passed back among the pines with deliberate calm, and was gone.

Noise returned to the street at once, louder than before because men had briefly been forced to confront the difference between their own excitability and the measured confidence of someone standing on his own ground.

Miller cursed and demanded riders. Another man muttered that they were being studied for weakness. The older miner said, "Maybe they want us to know they're here. That's not the same thing." Few listened.

The camp divided over the matter all day. Some wanted immediate pursuit. Some wanted caution. Some merely wanted their fear dressed in action so they would not have to name it fear. Sam gave the advice reason required and most men disliked.

"Bring the outlying stock closer in," he said. "Keep water and powder where you can lay hands on them. Post watches who know the difference between a shadow and a man. And don't ride blind into timber commanded by people born to it."

Roy heard that and later, while helping move casks in the store, said, "You do have a talent for making a room dislike you while secretly needing you."

"A camp," Sam answered, "and a room are not so different."

By afternoon Birchville resumed the motions of business, but with altered nerves. Men worked by the creek with rifles near. Women drew water in pairs. Children were called in earlier from play. The Beans' place did brisk trade in tobacco, coffee, and talk, and most of the talk traveled in circles around the watcher on the hill. Roy poured drinks and listened, but he no longer repeated the foolishest versions. He had seen enough in that single still figure to know bravado was an inadequate response.

Late in the day, Sam walked the western rise alone, not far enough to invite trouble, only enough to see the approaches with his own eyes. He found cut stumps above camp, pine limbs stripped for bedding, fresh mule sign where no trail had lain for long, and the creek already muddier below than above. Everywhere there showed the marks of recent intrusion.

At a shelf of stone overlooking the water he stopped.

Across the creek, partly screened by young pines, stood the same Apache man he had seen in the morning. Beside him was an older man wrapped in a dark blanket. Between them stood a boy, perhaps twelve, holding a pony by a rawhide lead.

None of them raised a weapon.

For a long moment the four looked at one another across the water. Then the older man stooped, touched the creek, and lifted his hand palm upward. After that he laid the same hand on the trunk of a pine freshly scarred by axe-blows and looked at Sam again.

No word was needed.

Water. Trees. Ground. Not vacant. Not yours simply because you have entered with tools and hunger.

Sam gave a slow nod. It was not an apology large enough for the camp's presence, nor a surrender, nor any settlement at all. But it was acknowledgment, and in that country acknowledgment was already more honest than most of the street below had yet achieved.

The boy watched him with grave bright eyes.

Then the older man touched the boy's shoulder and all three moved away into the trees without haste, as if they had merely shown what needed showing and no more.

When Sam returned to camp near sunset, Roy looked at him once and said, "You found something."

"Yes."

"What?"

"Perspective."

Roy made a face. "That sounds unprofitable."

"It usually is."

Yet Roy said no more, because he saw in Sam's face that the answer was not for jest.

That night the room filled again. Men drank, argued, and tried to laugh down what the day had made difficult to ignore. Roy kept the room lively where he could, but he found his eyes going more than once toward the door and the ridge beyond it.

Near closing time he said quietly to Sam, "You've seen enough now to know what we really are here, haven't you?"

Sam wiped down the counter slowly.

"Yes."

Roy waited.

"We are the new thing in an old country," Sam said. "And the old country has noticed."

Roy stood silent a moment, then nodded once, more to himself than his brother.

That was the first time Sam thought the lesson might yet take in him.

CHAPTER THREE

The Gathering Storm

By the third day the camp had taken on that strained and watchful character which comes over men when danger is expected yet delayed.

Fear borne suddenly is one thing; it strikes, spends itself, and leaves a man weaker or clearer according to his nature. But fear that lingers at the edge of sight and never wholly enters, that rustles in the timber and rides the ridges without showing its full hand, works more subtly. It sours tempers, sharpens foolishness, and makes enemies of those who yesterday might have shared a bottle and spoken kindly enough.

Birchville had reached that state.

The diggings still filled each morning, because gold has a way of persuading men they can afford risks they would condemn in any other profession. Pans flashed in Bear Creek. Rockers creaked. The arrastra turned slow and grinding under mule power. Men bent over their work with rifles laid within arm's reach, and every little while one or another would straighten suddenly and cast his eyes toward the ridges as if he had heard something the others had missed.

The town above the creek wore the same divided temper. Hammers still struck. Wagons still rolled. Stores still opened. But the motion had changed. Men no longer moved with careless confidence. They glanced uphill before stepping into the street. Women kept children nearer the central cabins. Horses stayed saddled longer. No room in camp, whether store, cookfire, or saloon, remained free long from the same narrowing subjects: sign, road, water, watches, grazing lines, and what was to be done next.

At the Beans' place, the room held more argument than laughter.

Miller came in near midday with the same fury that had governed him since the loss of his horses, and perhaps since the first moment anyone suggested his judgment was not equal to his volume.

"I say again," he declared, planting both fists on the counter, "if we wait much longer, they'll strip us horse by horse and claim by claim."

Roy, polishing a glass, answered without looking up, "And if you ride much sooner, you may save them the trouble by delivering yourselves."

Miller turned on him. "You too?"

Roy set the glass down.

"I am trying out wisdom," he said. "It fits poorly, but I dislike it less than I expected."

A few men laughed, because Roy could still move a room when he wished. Miller did not.

He fixed on Sam instead. "I want riders."

"What you want," Sam said, "is a result. Riding is not the same thing."

"We can't do nothing."

"No," Sam answered. "There is much between doing nothing and doing folly."

The phrase passed through the room and out into Main Street before the hour was up, repeated with irritation by those who preferred action to reflection and with quiet approval by those who feared the cost of both. Yet sense alone could not master a camp already strained.

There was too much shame abroad in Birchville. Too many men had felt themselves watched from the ridges, judged by the country, and found less in command than they had intended to appear. Such feelings do not always make men cautious. Often they make them louder.

By afternoon Miller had gathered his party.

They stood in the street with rifles, pistols, and the confidence of men who meant to prove themselves before supper and talk of it through the night. Briscoe went. Two freighters' hands. A miner from the north cut. A pair of younger fellows who had no business riding into country they did not understand and therefore were eager to do exactly that. Others considered going and thought better of it, which in Birchville passed for prudence rather than honesty.

Roy and Sam watched from the porch of the store. Haskins stood farther off near the horse lines, one hand resting on the top rail.

"They're riding into a lesson," he said.

Roy heard him.

"You don't expect them back whole?"

Haskins looked at him once. "I expect the mountain to grade them stricter than they expect."

Miller rode at the front, rifle across his saddle, beard bright in the sun.

"We'll fetch the horses and the answer with 'em!" he called.

Roy said under his breath, "That is a fine line if a man cares more for lines than for outcomes."

Sam glanced at him. The answer mattered less than the fact Roy had made it. There had been a time not long before when such a ride would have appealed to all the lighter parts of him. Now he watched it with less admiration than unease.

The party disappeared into the western draw.

The day dragged after that in the mean fashion of all waiting days. Men worked badly. Talk broke off in the middle and resumed elsewhere. The Beans' place filled and emptied in turns, but the room never escaped the expectation hanging over it. Even those who approved the ride did so with a strained appetite, like gamblers who have placed too much on another man's hand.

Toward evening the light began to thin over the pines. One by one men in camp found reason to look west. Women came out to doorways. A freighter climbed onto his wagon seat for a better view and stayed there. The Buckhorn proprietor stood beneath his sign with arms folded, face blank with the effort of not appearing invested.

The first sound was not hoofbeats, but shots—ragged and hurried, far up the slope. Then came shouting. Then, after too brief a silence, a riderless horse burst into the edge of camp, foam-flecked and wild.

The whole street came alive at once.

When Miller's men returned, they returned in disorder. One rider came bent over the saddle horn, blood dark on his sleeve. Another had lost his hat and most of his color. One horse had an arrow buried in the leather of the saddle skirt where the rider's thigh had been a moment earlier. Miller himself rode in with pine needles in his beard, shoulder torn, eyes bright with the humiliating knowledge that the country had used him exactly as Sam said it would.

"They were waiting!" he gasped. "Up in the wash. On both sides."

Of course they had been.

The party had ridden into the draw, been allowed deeper than wisdom permitted, and then caught where the high ground belonged entirely to those defending it. They had been fired upon from above and to either side in a place where knowledge of the terrain counted more than loud courage. Two men were missing. More might have died had the attackers chosen slaughter over warning.

That fact settled over Birchville more heavily than the wounded.

"They could have cut you to pieces," Haskins said.

One of the returned men, face white beneath the dust, answered, "They might have."

Sam said quietly, "Remember that."

Men did not want to remember it. Yet no one who had seen the condition of the riders could wholly deny it. The Apache defense around Birchville was not random bloodshed. It was measured pressure in protection of country, and that truth made some of the camp's easier stories harder to tell.

The wounded were carried inside. Water boiled. Shirts were torn for bandages. The Buckhorn took in some. The Beans' place took in the rest. Roy worked quickly and without show, holding lamps, tearing cloth, and keeping frightened men from crowding the injured. He had more steadiness in him under pressure than his manners often suggested, and Sam saw others notice it too.

Outside, the temper of the camp hardened. Not into wisdom, but into something adjacent to resolve. Men pulled stock inward. Watches doubled. Ore sacks and wagon beds were shifted into better lines. The old cannon in Main Street, once a piece of local pride and foolish ornament, began to acquire a darker seriousness in men's minds.

That night Birchville met in the Buckhorn.

The room was smoky, close, and loud with fear wearing the clothes of policy. Miller demanded retaliation. The lawyer from Mesilla called for order where little existed. Merchants wanted safety enough for freight and trade to continue. Haskins wanted no more blind riding into country the town did not command. The blacksmith wanted fewer fools and thicker walls.

Sam, against his preference, spoke for the truth none of them wanted in full.

"They know their own ground," he said. "They have grievance enough. They have shown restraint where they might have shown more destruction. If you refuse to learn from that, then what follows is on your vanity as much as on their rifles."

The room disliked him for it. Yet the words stayed.

Roy stood near the wall and listened more carefully than he once would have. He was not yet ready to agree with all of Sam's conclusions, but he had stopped believing that the loudest camp stories were equal to what the country itself was saying.

At length the committee, if such a name may be given to a roomful of angry and frightened men, reached a miserable compromise. No more reckless rides. A smaller delegation at first light under a white cloth. Recover the dead if possible. See whether words had any place left in the matter. Meanwhile the camp would fortify, watch, and wait.

When the meeting ended, Birchville had crossed into a new stage of itself.

The town still stood. But it no longer imagined itself merely unsettled. It had become a place under strain, not yet fully besieged, not yet beyond all possibility of measured contact, but already balanced on a narrowing ledge between appetite and consequence.

Later, outside the store, Roy stood with Sam and watched the camp draw inward around its own fear.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well what?"

"Do you still think this place can be read like a ledger?"

Sam listened a moment to the street before them, the room behind them, and the dark stillness beyond the last cabin.

"No," he said. "A ledger only counts what a man can carry into the room. This place is larger than that."

Roy was quiet.

Then he said, "I am beginning to dislike how much of it was here before we came."

Sam looked at him once, hearing the truth inside the jest.

"Yes," he said. "That too is part of the lesson."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cannon in Main Street

The first shots came from opposite sides of camp so close together that afterward no man could say which report had brought the greater confusion.

Until that moment Birchville had lived in expectation. Men had watched the ridges, shortened their lines, raised walls, and argued in every room over whether the camp was in danger or merely inconvenienced by its own nerves. But expectation, however trying, still leaves a place room for hope. Once powder spoke from both sides of the town and the cry rose near the horse lines, hope gave way to action and the camp became at once what perhaps it had been from the beginning without saying so plain: not a town at peace, but a precarious post planted in contested country.

Men came pouring into Main Street half-dressed and wholly armed. Some had boots unlaced, some shirts open at the throat, some hats jammed crooked on heads not yet clear of sleep or whiskey. Lamps flashed in doorways and were immediately shaded by wiser hands. Horses screamed and strained at their ropes. A mule broke loose and hammered between cabins, showering sparks where its shoes struck stone. From somewhere near the creek came the splintering crack of a ball striking timber.

"Take cover!" Sam shouted, though the order was hardly needed. Men were already dropping behind barrels, ore sacks, wagon beds, and the thicker corners of adobe walls.

Roy had the shotgun out from under the counter before Sam had crossed the threshold.

"East and west both," he said.

"Yes."

"Testing us?"

"No," said Sam. "Reading us."

That was nearer the truth. The firing did not come on as one mad rush. It moved instead in deliberate bursts—now from the dark above the creek, now from the western timber, now from the higher slope to the north where rooflines showed against the ridge. The purpose seemed less to overrun the camp in a single stroke than to show it its own weaknesses: how exposed its horse lines were, how badly the cabins sat, how poor its lines of movement became once pressure was applied from more than one direction.

Miller came running stooped across the street with a rifle in one hand and a revolver in the other, as if one weapon alone were insufficient to his outrage.

"Hold the west line!" he shouted. "They're in the timber!"

A ball cut dust before him and he flung himself behind the old cannon that sat in Main Street like some antique boast suddenly asked to justify itself.

Roy looked toward it with an expression almost affectionate.

"Well," he said, "our iron friend may yet earn his keep."

"You know enough to serve it?" Sam asked.

"Enough to try."

"That," Sam said, "is what worries me."

Yet the cannon had become by then more than iron. Men already looked to it as if the town's nerve were somehow stored in the barrel. If it fired, Birchville would hear itself answering back in a voice larger than rifle shots.

Before Roy could move toward it, a woman cried out near the south cabins. Sam turned. Men were already herding women and children toward the Buckhorn and the heavier adobe buildings in the center line. The Buckhorn's thick walls had once seemed chiefly a matter of comfort and ambition. Now they showed their sterner use. What had served for meals, card games, and the camp's performance of refinement became at once refuge.

"Get them inside!" Sam shouted.

Roy looked from the cannon to the movement in the street.

"Go," Sam said. "I'll see to the gun."

Roy hesitated one brief moment. Once he might have stayed for the larger spectacle. Instead he ran to help move a child, a blanket roll, and then an old woman who had frozen entirely in the middle of the road.

That choice, small as it seemed under fire, marked another turn in him.

The shooting tightened.

A miner at the eastern edge of town rose too high behind a wagon and spun backward with a cry, clutching his upper arm. Another fired wildly into the trees without seeing what he aimed at and was answered at once by two shots that splintered the wagon tongue above his head.

"Hold till you see!" Sam shouted.

But fear wastes powder almost as quickly as bravado does.

The blacksmith and a young Cornish miner had already reached the cannon. Together with Sam they dragged it a little straighter in the road and began the clumsy business of readying it. The piece was old, ill-mounted, and far more imposing than reliable, but it had one great advantage over every rifle in camp: it could speak to the whole town at once.

Before they could fire, flame rose from the eastern cabins.

At first it was only a wavering tongue of orange beneath a roof where a lantern, dropped or struck, had caught kindling. But in a mountain camp built of pine, cedar, canvas, and dry boards, fire is more democratic than bullets. It makes no fine distinction between the brave and the timid. The wind that had worried the camp all day seized it eagerly and bent it along the eaves.

"Bucket line!" someone yelled.

For one moment Birchville had two emergencies and no spare steadiness for either.

Roy saw the danger at once and looked back toward the cannon. Sam, still with rammer in hand, shouted, "Go!"

Roy obeyed. He ran for the burning cabin with three others, seized a bucket from a stunned miner, and threw himself into the work as if motion alone might master both flame and fear. A roof beam caught. Someone beat it with a wet blanket. The child of the cabin's owner screamed from the Buckhorn steps while his mother, held back by two women, tried to wrench herself free.

Meanwhile Sam oversaw the cannon.

"Not for noise," he said to the blacksmith as they set the charge. "For purpose."

The blacksmith grunted. "If purpose comes quick enough."

The first discharge shook the whole street.

It boomed against the mountain and rolled back in echoes. Flame leapt from the muzzle. Smoke engulfed the men around it. The recoil drove the piece half a foot back in its crude bed and nearly knocked the young Cornishman flat. For an instant every other sound in Birchville vanished beneath that one report.

Then the camp shouted.

Not because the shot had certainly done much damage, though movement was seen in the western trees, but because the town had heard itself answer and mistook, if only briefly, sound for mastery.

The effect on the defenders was immediate. Men who had shrunk low behind sacks and wagons lifted themselves higher. Rifles began speaking with a little more order. The camp, though still frightened, found a momentary spine in the gun's voice.

Roy, blackened with smoke and water by then, turned from the fire line long enough to hear the report and said, half to himself, "There speaks Birchville's vanity entire."

The fire near the cabin was checked only by furious labor. Roy climbed the porch beam with a wet blanket, smothered sparks under his boots, dropped to the ground again, and seized another bucket before the room had finished shouting after him. In earlier days the act would have been pure theater. Now it had theater in it still, because Roy could never wholly leave that part of himself alone, but there was something else beneath it too: responsibility. He was trying not to save face, but to save a wall.

The attack did not end with the cannon's first voice. The pressure shifted instead. Shots came now from higher up the north slope. A mule collapsed near the freight yard. A man at the horse lines fell and did not rise. Another trying to carry water lost both bucket and courage when a ball tore the staves apart in his hands.

Sam oversaw the second loading with grim precision. Twice men urged him to fire into darkness where nothing showed but fear's imagination. Twice he refused. Not until mounted movement showed clear for a breath against the northern ridge did he give the word.

The second shot boomed out heavier than the first.

The figures vanished into the timber. Whether struck or merely scattered, no man in Birchville could say. But the fire from that quarter slackened, and again the town shouted—more from relief this time than triumph.

The hours dragged after that in broken violence. Shooting tightened, then spread. The camp held, but only in the way all such places hold: by fear, labor, the luck of thicker walls, and the fact that the pressure against it was still measured rather than absolute.

Near midnight the first true easing came.

The firing fell off into wider, more distant shots. Men strained to hear what the silence meant. The fire at the eastern cabin had been beaten down to smoke and occasional sparks. Women and children remained inside the Buckhorn and other heavier structures, held there less now by command than by knowledge.

Then, from beyond the camp high in the dark timber, there came a cry—sharp, carrying, and strange to the ears of those who did not know the language of the country. Another answered farther off. Then another beyond that.

It was not the sound of defeat, nor exactly of victory. It was communication, passed ridge to ridge in the old manner of those who belonged to the land and had need of no street or signal lamp to hold them together.

Then came silence.

A long while passed before Birchville trusted it.

At length men rose stiffly from behind wagons and walls. The street showed its cost in plain terms. A dead mule near the freight yard. Two walls pocked and splintered. Blood dark in the dust in more than one place. The charred cabin still smoking. The Buckhorn marked by fresh balls in its plaster yet standing as thick and steady as before. The Beans' signboard, never properly painted, now bearing a neat hole through one corner as if the night had signed its own claim upon the establishment.

Roy came back at last and sat on the store porch breathing hard. Sam joined him a moment later.

"Well," Roy said after some time, "I believe this camp has stopped pretending."

"Yes," said Sam.

Roy looked down Main Street where men moved like sleepwalkers in the first gray hint of dawn.

"It did not feel like victory."

"No."

"Yet it still stands."

"For now."

Roy nodded and after a little while said, "They could have done worse."

Sam looked toward the timbered slopes.

"Yes," he said. "And Birchville ought to remember that."

That, more than anything, was the truth lying over the camp at daybreak.

It had survived, but not by prevailing.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Morning After

Daybreak came cold and merciless over Birchville.

There is one small kindness in darkness: it softens broken things. But morning has no such mercy. When the first hard light entered the camp and laid its hand on every roof, wagon, wall, and blood-marked patch of ground, no deception remained. What the night had done was there to be counted plainly.

Smoke rose from the charred cabin on the eastern edge in thin gray threads. The street showed scars where bullets had bitten timber or kicked up dirt. A mule lay stiff in its traces near the freight yard. Near the Buckhorn men had laid out the dead beneath sheets and saddle blankets because in camps like Birchville death must often be managed where it falls and propriety comes after necessity if it comes at all.

Sam Bean stood with hat in hand and looked upon them without speech.

He was not by nature a sentimental man, nor one given to public grief. Yet there are sights before which even the practical must bow, if only inwardly. One of the dead was scarcely older than a boy. Another had a wife somewhere in Missouri, if the stories he had told of himself were true. Pike had not yet been brought in. That absence was its own weight.

Roy came beside him carrying two cups of coffee, black and hot enough to punish the mouth.

"Well," he said after a while, "the town has had its lesson."

"Only one of them," Sam answered.

The grief of the camp did not soften it in any simple way.

Some men were quieter. Some more careful. But for many the sight of the dead acted less as correction than as fuel. Fear joined to blood easily becomes appetite for reprisal, and reprisal has always worn fine words when invited into frontier rooms.

Pike's washerwoman came through the gathered men before noon, shawl clutched hard around her shoulders, eyes swollen but dry now. She came straight to Miller.

"You brought him to this," she said.

No one moved.

Miller stared at her as if struck.

"You rode out," she went on, voice low and terrible. "You called men. You promised they'd come back."

A lesser man might have shrunk from her. Miller had gone too far in his own pride to do so cleanly.

"They chose to ride."

"They chose because you shamed them if they would not."

That landed harder than any slap.

For a moment the whole street seemed to balance on what he would do next. Sam thought he might strike her in his mortification. He did not. Pride held him upright where decency did not.

"Take her away," he muttered.

No one obeyed.

The woman looked once at the dead laid out near the Buckhorn, then turned and went back through the street without another word.

Roy exhaled softly beside Sam.

"Well," he said, "that was a truer sermon than the preacher will manage."

Sam did not answer. He was watching the faces of the men. Some had hardened under the accusation because shame in rough company often curdles into anger. Others looked unsettled, as if they had been forced to glimpse themselves through a clearer glass than custom permits.

The burials took place before noon on the rise above the creek.

There was no appointed minister fit to such work, only the gaunt man in black who had denounced gold from an upturned crate two days earlier and who now, being the nearest thing the camp possessed to clergy, was called upon to say words over the dead. He stood bareheaded in the cold light, weather pulling at his coat, and read from a weathered Testament with more honesty than eloquence.

Around him stood Birchville—hats off, rifles near, faces grim. Some listened. Some merely endured. A few looked toward the hills even then, unwilling to give either heaven or death their full attention while danger still held the ridges.

Roy stood at the back with Sam.

"Do you suppose," Roy said quietly, "that men hear scripture any better with graves open before them?"

"For an hour, perhaps."

"And after?"

Sam glanced sidelong. "Afterward they hear themselves again."

That proved near enough the truth. Scarcely had the last shovelful been thrown before the talk resumed—at first low, then gathering force as it moved through the camp like fire in dry grass. Men spoke of patrols, punishments, larger expeditions, and showing the district at last what Birchville meant to be. The dead had not softened them. Rather the fresh earth seemed to require payment, and where justice is not clearly seen men will often accept vengeance as its counterfeit.

By midafternoon a committee was called at the Buckhorn.

The room smelled of smoke, spilled whiskey, damp wool, and the close tiredness of men who have been frightened all night and mean to turn that fear into policy before it exposes itself. Miller sat stiff-backed at one table with his wounded shoulder bandaged and his pride more deeply hurt than the flesh beneath. Beside him were three miners, the blacksmith, the lawyer from Mesilla, the Buckhorn proprietor, and others whose chief qualification seemed to be the volume of their opinions. Haskins stood by the rear wall rather than sit with them. Roy came in with Sam and took up his place nearby.

The matter before them was plain enough: whether Birchville should abandon the camp, fortify it further, or answer the attack at once with force.

"Abandon?" cried one man. "Leave gold in the creek because we took a bloody nose?"

"We've more than that," answered another, glancing toward the rear room where one of the wounded groaned behind a blanket. "We've dead."

Miller smote the table with his good hand.

"We gave them the advantage by riding blind. Next time we go prepared."

"Next time?" said Sam. "You speak as if the first time had taught anything."

"It taught me they mean war."

"No," Sam said. "It taught you they know their own ground and you do not."

That brought an ugly silence.

Miller rose halfway from his chair.

"You had best choose your side plain, Bean."

Sam did not rise.

"I have," he said. "The side of truth, whether it flatters you or not."

A lean miner near the end of the table said, "And what truth is that?"

Sam looked from face to face before answering.

"That this country was not lying vacant in expectation of our coming. That the people in those hills have watched strangers cut their timber, muddy their creek, frighten their game, and build a town in the middle of it. That they have shown, more than once, they can destroy this camp if that is their purpose. Yet what they have done so far is warning, pressure, measured reprisal, and firing where they might have killed more than they did. If you refuse to understand the difference, then you are not brave men. You are blind ones."

The words fell heavily.

Some looked away. Others flushed dark with anger. Miller's eyes took on that bright dangerous shine which comes into a man when he hears a truth he cannot bear and yet cannot wholly deny.

"So we bow to them, is that it?" he said. "Ask leave to dig our own claims?"

"No," Sam answered. "I say only that if you make a slaughter of this, you will not end it by force of wishes and noise."

The blacksmith spoke then, slowly.

"He's right in part. They've had the advantage and not used it to the full."

"In part?" Miller snapped. "You want to thank them for mercy?"

The blacksmith's face hardened. "I want to remember it. A man who forgets what restrained his enemy may soon teach him not to be restrained again."

That nearly ended in blows. Chairs scraped. A hand went to a revolver butt. Roy stepped away from the wall at once, smiling still, though not pleasantly.

"Gentlemen," he said, "if we are to shoot one another, let us at least settle first who pays for the broken furniture."

The jest bought the room a breath.

Miller, finding the moment slipping from him, turned instead toward Sam with a different insult.

"There," he said, pointing, "is the difference between us. You think like a storekeeper. I think like a man."

Roy's expression changed at once.

He moved away from the wall and came between them—not theatrically now, but with the quiet speed of a man who has finally understood the cost of letting a frightened room name recklessness courage.

"You'll not say that again," he said mildly.

Miller blinked.

"This between brothers?"

"It is between manners," Roy replied.

The room changed around them.

Some men rose half from their chairs. The lawyer stepped back. Haskins folded his arms and watched with interest. The Buckhorn proprietor froze over the same glass he had been drying for the last half hour.

Miller looked from Roy to Sam and back again. He was not by nature timid, but neither was he eager to fight both Beans in a room full of witnesses when one shoulder still pained him and half the camp had begun doubting his judgment.

Sam said quietly, "Sit down, Roy."

Roy did not move.

"Sit down," Sam repeated, more sharply.

The younger man held Miller's gaze a moment longer, then smiled without warmth and stepped aside.

"There," he said. "My brother has saved you the trouble of being measured accurately."

Miller muttered something too low to be worth repeating and righted his chair. But the meeting had changed. What had begun as a town arguing with the hills had become also a room arguing with itself, and that division would matter more as the novel went forward.

At last the committee reached its compromise. The camp would hold where it was for the present. It would strengthen the center. It would send no more blind parties into the hills. At first light a smaller delegation under a white cloth would go to seek the missing and see whether words had any place left in the matter.

The decision pleased no one entirely, which was perhaps the best that could be said for it.

When the meeting broke, the night outside had grown black and cold. Clouds had covered the stars. The pines on the ridges stood against the sky like the teeth of a great saw.

Roy walked back with Sam to the store in silence until they reached the porch.

"Well," Roy said then, "I believe the town has had its first true taste."

"Yes."

"And what do you make of it?"

Sam paused with one foot on the step.

"That the camp has not yet understood what has spared it."

Roy looked toward the dark timber.

"You still think they could have done worse."

"Yes."

Roy considered that.

"That is a poor sort of comfort."

"It is not comfort," Sam said. "It is the beginning of understanding, if men are willing."

Roy glanced once at him, then toward the Buckhorn where light still glowed through thick walls and shadow figures moved beyond the windows.

"And if they're not willing?"

Sam opened the door.

"Then the lesson grows dearer."

That night Birchville slept lightly beneath the tall pines. Watches moved through Main Street. Now and again a horse shifted at the line or a loose board knocked in the wind. Beyond the last cabin the mountain held its silence, stern and patient, as though it had all the time in the world to test the truth of men's arrangements.

And in that silence the camp waited for morning, not yet beyond all measure, not yet fully over the edge, but already resting on a much narrower ledge than most of its people knew.

CHAPTER SIX

The Parley Trail

At first light the camp wore the spent and hollow look that follows a night of fear too long sustained.

The men moved slower, not from laziness but from the fatigue that comes when a body has been kept upright by danger and must afterward remember how to be flesh again. Smoke rose from cookfires in thin reluctant threads. The graves above the creek were still dark with fresh earth. Somewhere a mule rang its bell once and then fell quiet, as though even the animals had learned that sound carried farther in troubled country than men suppose.

Sam Bean was already saddled when Roy came out of the store pulling on his gloves and settling his hat.

"You mean to ride without me?" Roy asked.

"I mean to ride with men who know how to hold their tongues."

Roy glanced toward the brightening street, where a few figures were already moving between cabins and horse lines.

"Then you'll go light in company," he said. "For I see none such in camp."

Sam bent once more to the cinch.

"You have no necessity to come."

"That may be," Roy answered, "but I mean to do it."

"There may be talk."

"So much the better. You do the listening. I'll do my best not to improve matters by speaking."

That answer drew a brief look from Sam. It was not approval exactly, but it marked another small turn in Roy. The younger man still loved a room, a crowd, and the ready line that made men laugh or yielded them to his management. But he had learned enough in the last days to distrust his own impulse for display at certain hours.

The party gathered in Main Street not long after sunrise. It was a smaller company than the one Miller had led to disaster, and a quieter one. Haskins was there, spare and weathered, with the look of a man whose eyes had long ago learned to read ground before they trusted human intention. The blacksmith came too, not because he was suited to parleys, but because steady men are useful where rooms of argument have already failed. Ortega the teamster had been persuaded to ride because he knew enough fragments of Spanish, English, and frontier traffic with men of different worlds to be of some use if words proved less useless than most expected. The gaunt preacher in black came also, not because anyone believed doctrine would settle the matter, but because camps under strain will sometimes send along whatever passes for conscience when they are uncertain of their own.

Miller wished to come and was refused. He wore the refusal with the injured dignity of a man who believes denial itself proves his courage.

A white cloth was tied to a pole. No one in the party mistook it for magic.

As they rode out, Birchville watched them in near silence. Women stood in doorways with arms folded tight against the morning cold. Two boys climbed onto a wagon tongue for a better view until one of the mothers pulled them down. The Buckhorn's front remained shut, though smoke rose from the kitchen chimney. The old cannon in Main Street sat dark and idle in the early light, foolish again

now that it was not speaking. Miller stood beside it with his good hand hooked in his belt, his face set in that expression men wear when they have been denied action and think themselves the more manly for resentment.

They took the western draw at a cautious pace.

Haskins led where the ground narrowed and widened, reading sign aloud only when useful. Here the churn of frightened horses from Miller's earlier ride. There the shelf where shots had come down into the wash. Farther up, brush broken on a higher bank where riflemen had once lain over the route below.

Roy looked up at the cutbanks and pines.

"They had the whole wash under them."

"Yes," Haskins said.

"And could have killed more."

"Yes."

Roy was silent after that.

They rode deeper into country Birchville had been pretending to know. Fresh stumps shone pale where men had cut pine. Mule sign crossed newer tracks not yet old enough to deserve the name of trail. The creek, clear and narrow above, ran muddier below where the camp had already begun turning it over for color. Everywhere there showed the marks of the town's appetite.

Sam saw Roy noticing those things now too.

The first body they found was Pike's.

He lay beneath a leaning pine where the ground sloped slightly toward the water, his face emptied of expression and his shape already stiff in the mountain air. His rifle was gone. His boots remained. There was no mutilation, no theatrical cruelty of the sort frightened camps invent for themselves when reality proves more exact and less convenient than rumor. Only death. Sudden, exposed, and lonely in difficult country.

The preacher took off his hat. Ortega crossed himself. Roy, who had once been inclined to move quickly past solemnity if a room offered some livelier refuge, stood very still and said nothing.

"What now?" asked the blacksmith.

"We take him back if we can," said Sam.

Haskins shook his head.

"Not yet. Not unless the country gives leave."

Roy looked toward him. "Leave?"

Haskins did not soften the answer.

"You think we're alone because you see no one."

No man argued after that.

They moved on, more slowly than before, and before long the answer came. A call sounded from the timber ahead. Then another from higher ground to the right. The party halted at once. Hands moved nearer rifles, but no rifle was raised.

From among the pines ahead stepped three Apache men.

They came into view without hurry, not concealed because they had chosen not to be concealed. One was the older man Sam had seen before across the creek, wrapped in a dark blanket despite the

growing warmth of day. Another was younger and broad-shouldered, with a rifle resting easy across one arm. The third looked scarcely more than grown, yet held himself with the steadiness of one already long accustomed to carrying responsibility in difficult country.

The older man halted where the trail widened beside a granite shoulder and raised one hand, palm outward.

No one moved.

Then Ortega nudged his horse a little forward and spoke first in Spanish, then in broken English, and then in the halting mix of frontier phrases by which men sometimes bridge part of a distance that language cannot fully cross. The older man listened without expression. When Ortega finished, the man answered in measured speech that the teamster only partly followed.

At length Ortega turned.

"He says you may come no farther."

"Ask if we may take our dead," Sam said.

Ortega did so.

There followed a brief exchange among the Apache themselves. The younger man answered first, sharply, not in anger exactly, but in the tone of one correcting presumption. The older man listened, then spoke again.

Ortega swallowed.

"He says that one may be taken."

"And the other?" asked the blacksmith.

The older man spoke again at greater length.

Ortega listened hard, piecing sense together where he could.

"He says there is another. He says he lives."

No one answered at once.

The older man continued, his voice even.

"He says your town cuts trees, muddies water, frightens game, and grows with every moon. He says you stand where you were not invited."

Ortega glanced uncertainly at Sam, as if wondering whether to soften the message. Sam said, "Give it plain."

The teamster nodded and did so.

The wind moved softly through the pines overhead. Somewhere nearby water passed over stone with a thin silver sound.

At length Sam said, "Tell him we hear what he says."

Ortega translated. The older man answered with a brief phrase.

"He says hearing is not the same as stopping."

That struck more sharply than any open threat might have done.

Roy shifted in the saddle. "Ask him—ask if there can be peace."

Sam turned briefly toward him. The question was right, but its coming from Roy marked again how far the younger man had traveled already from the first days in camp.

Ortega put the question with care. The younger Apache gave a short bitter laugh, though it contained little amusement. The older man said something to him which quieted him at once. Then he answered, low enough that Ortega had to lean to catch it.

When he turned back, his face had changed.

"He says peace is the shape of a man's feet on the ground. He says if you stand where you should not stand, there is no peace. He says if you take what feeds children, there is no peace. He says if men come hungry for yellow metal and leave nothing living untroubled, then what word should he use for that?"

No one in the party had a ready answer.

The preacher, who had remained silent till then, said quietly, "Ask him if blood may yet be spared."

Ortega translated. The older man listened a long while before replying.

"He says blood can always be spared by those who choose not to spill it first."

The younger man then pointed not at the riders, but at the white cloth above them.

More words passed.

Ortega frowned in concentration.

"He says that cloth is good cloth today. He says if men ride again as they rode before, the cloth will mean nothing."

The meaning of the meeting was already plain enough. Yet one further thing occurred that fixed it permanently in Roy.

From behind the trees to the left stepped a woman carrying a child on one hip. Another child held to her skirt. She did not come near, nor need to. She stood only where the delegation could see her. Her face showed neither fear nor curiosity, only the tired clarity of one who has already lived too long under the effects of other people's intrusion.

Roy stared.

The older man shifted just enough to make clear that he had allowed the riders to see her.

Not a war cloud. Not a camp rumor. Not some faceless mass invented to flatter Birchville's sense of its own importance. Home.

Then the woman moved back among the trees, and the children with her vanished as naturally as shade.

No one in the party spoke for a while after that.

Terms, if that word may be used for what passed there, were not peace and not treaty. They were warning clearly restated. Pike might be taken back. The living missing man would not be returned on the camp's demand. Birchville must send no more blind rides into the hills. Less cutting. Less ranging. Less assumption that the camp's appetite gave it title to all it touched. If the town remained, it would remain under pressures not of its own choosing.

No hands were shaken. No false ceremony closed the meeting. Yet there was understanding, and in country such as that understanding may be farther than agreement and more costly to reach.

They turned back at last, Pike's body lashed across a mule, the little party moving down the trail with the awkward solemnity such burdens always impose.

For a long while no one spoke.

Then Roy said, "If Miller had seen those children, he'd still call it enemy country."

Haskins answered before Sam could.

"That is because some men can only imagine the world in ways that justify them."

Roy accepted that in silence.

By the time they neared Birchville, the sun had begun westering and the camp, seeing the white cloth and the mule bearing the dead, sent men hurrying to meet them. Faces searched the party one by one for signs—of victory, of failure, of cause to be angry, of permission to be afraid. Miller came among the first, his bandaged shoulder making him look, in his own opinion, more heroic rather than less.

"Well?" he demanded. "What word?"

Sam dismounted before answering.

"Word enough," he said.

The body was carried off first, which sobered the street. Pike's washerwoman stood and watched in silence as they bore him by. Roy removed his hat and remained bareheaded until the body had passed from sight.

Only then did the crowd thicken before the Beans' place.

Miners, freighters, gamblers, camp women, merchants, frightened men who wanted reassurance, loud men who wanted anger sanctioned, and practical men who wanted facts more than comfort—all gathered in the street. The old cannon stood among them like a silent witness.

Sam stepped onto the porch because the crowd required height if not authority.

"We rode under a white cloth," he said, "and we were allowed to return under it. That should tell you something before any other word is spoken."

There was muttering at once, but he went on.

"We found Pike. We brought him back. The other man lives."

That startled them.

"Where?"

"In the hills."

"Taken?"

"Held," Sam answered. "And alive by choice."

That disturbed the town more than a simpler tale of immediate murder would have done, because restraint in one's enemy complicates the easy stories men prefer to tell themselves.

"What terms?" Miller called.

Sam looked directly at him.

"The same the country has been giving us from the first, only now spoken clearer. Keep close. Cut less. Range less. Ride no more reckless parties into the mountains with killing in mind and call it courage afterward. Understand that this place stands where others already belong."

That was as much truth as Birchville could bear in one hearing.

Noise rose at once. The lawyer from Mesilla protested. A miner shouted that gold gave any man a right to stand where he could wash it. Another, older and poorer perhaps, muttered that gold had not yet learned to stop bullets. Miller swore aloud.

Through it all Roy remained quiet beside the porch rail, his face turned not toward the crowd but toward the timbered heights above town.

Sam saw then that the parley had done one important thing whether Birchville profited by it or not. Roy had seen families in the pines and heard a man speak not for bloodlust but for country. That knowledge could not be handed back to ignorance once received.

The meeting ran long and bitter, but no clean decision came of it that afternoon. Such decisions rarely do. What the parley did instead was worse for some and better for others: it stripped away illusion. No man in Birchville could now honestly claim he did not know what the quarrel was truly about.

That evening, when the store had quieted and only a few men remained drinking in corners, Roy came out to the porch where Sam sat with the ledger unopened on his knee.

"Well," Roy said, leaning one shoulder against the post, "we brought back more than a dead man."

"Yes."

"We brought back difficulty."

"We had that already."

Roy looked out over Main Street. The Buckhorn lamps were beginning to glow. Farther off, smoke rose from cooking fires into the dusk.

"That woman in the timber," he said slowly. "Those children. They did not look at us as if we were men entering an empty country. They looked at us as if we were the weather gone wrong."

Sam shut the ledger without opening it.

"That," he said, "is because for them we are."

Roy gave a short laugh, though there was no mirth in it.

"You have a gift for comfort."

"I have a gift for plainness. Comfort is dearer and seldom stocked."

They sat in silence after that while the mountain darkened and the camp settled into another night of uncertain peace.

Above Birchville, beneath the tall pines, the country waited to see whether the men below had heard anything at all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Terms of Staying

The news of the parley did not settle Birchville. It unsettled it.

Had Sam Bean come back with some plain tale fit for camp use—say that the Apache meant war entire and final, or else that they had slunk off into the farther mountains cowed by the white cloth and the camp's resolve—then the town might at least have known how to arrange its feelings. Men prefer a clean lie to a difficult truth, for a lie may be put to work at once, while a truth often stands in the doorway and demands an alteration in conduct.

What Sam had brought back was no such easy article.

The country had spoken, but not in the language of victory and defeat. It had said, as plainly as a mountain people could be expected to say to men who had entered their home with axes, pans, and restless certainty, that Birchville stood where it had no natural right to stand, and that if it meant to remain, it must remain differently. That was more than some men could bear and less than others could yet understand.

So for days the camp lived in argument.

Men argued in the Beans' place over whiskey and coffee, argued in the Buckhorn over cards and cold beans, argued at the diggings with rifles across their knees, argued while driving nails into cabin walls or dragging timbers into place for breastworks. Even the women, who had less time for speech and more for keeping life moving from one hour to the next, argued at the creek and over cookfires whether the town meant to survive, whether it ought to leave, whether the men had the sense God gave mules, and whether any woman in her right mind would trust a mining camp to choose prudence over pride while gold still lay in the creek.

Main Street itself bore witness to the change. Where once there had been a certain rude confidence in the way men lounged before doors and tied off horses by the hour, there was now motion with purpose. Cabins nearest the timber were abandoned or pulled inward where possible. Ore sacks were stacked against lower walls. Wagon beds were turned broadside in likely places. Fresh loopholes showed like dark eyes in plank and adobe. The horse lines had been drawn closer to the center. Birchville had begun to live not like a camp opening outward, but like one closing around its own vital parts.

At the Beans' store the business altered in kind, though not at first in quantity. Men still came, for men under strain require tobacco no less than in peace, and perhaps rather more. Flour, coffee, shot, powder, bacon, lamp oil, rope, and lead moved steadily. But the spending had changed its spirit. A week before, a miner might toss dust on the counter in the cheerful conviction that tomorrow's wash would repay it. Now he bought as a man provisioned against uncertainty. Even the whiskey was taken differently—not with the loose waste of a new camp, but with deliberate application, as if a bottle might steady what the room itself could not.

Roy observed this with a kind of restless dissatisfaction.

"They drink as if every glass were advice," he said one evening, polishing a glass that had no need of further polish.

"And what counsel does the bottle give?" Sam asked.

Roy set the glass down.

"That they are brave, wronged, and badly supplied."

"Then it lies in the customary fashion."

Roy leaned one shoulder against the shelf of tobacco twists and looked out through the open doorway into Main Street, where two miners were dragging a heavy timber into place before a cabin.

"They mean to fortify like an army," he said. "Yet half of them cannot agree on whether they're besieged, insulted, or merely inconvenienced."

"That is because," Sam replied, entering figures in the ledger, "they are all three."

Outside, the camp had begun dividing itself into recognizable parties.

There were first the hard men, or those who wished to be thought so, who held that no term short of complete submission from the hills could satisfy honor. Miller moved among these as naturally as a burr in a horse's mane. He had taken upon himself the air of a leader wronged by caution, and spoke everywhere as though he alone possessed the courage to say what all true men knew. Under his urging there was talk of larger expeditions, sterner measures, and the danger of allowing outsiders to dictate the habits of a gold camp.

Then there were the practical ones: merchants, freighters, older miners, laborers, and a few camp women who had long since learned that noble-sounding men are often the last to carry water and the first to demand sacrifice from others. These cared less for Birchville's "honor" than for whether the place could continue at all. They did not often speak in moral terms. They spoke instead of road conditions, freight costs, shrinking trade, the danger of ranging too far for timber or stock, and the simple truth that a town not supplied will not be preserved by loud opinions.

Last came the weary and the uncertain, who had not yet left but had already, in some inward manner, packed themselves. They moved through camp with the look of people measuring distance. When they bought from Sam, they bought small. When they drank from Roy, they watched the door. These were the ones most likely to slip away before dawn without farewell.

As for Sam and Roy, they found themselves set strangely between the parties—Sam by inclination and reason near the practical men, though less compromised by self-interest than many of them, and Roy, to his own surprise, drawing farther from the hard talk that once might have entertained him.

This showed itself first in small ways.

A freighter in the saloon side said one evening that the district ought to be swept clean. Roy, who was pouring whiskey at the time, looked at him and said:

"Would you then call it empty enough to satisfy your conscience?"

The freighter blinked.

"What's that to you?"

Roy smiled without warmth.

"Only that a man's conscience, like his bath, is often most lacking where the rest suppose it present."

The room laughed, but not comfortably. A few men looked at Roy with new attention. Sam, writing behind the counter, heard the exchange and said nothing, though he marked it.

Later, when the room had thinned and only a pair of card players remained near the stove, Roy came round behind the counter and poured himself a little whiskey.

"You needn't look at me so," he said.

"I have not looked at you at all," Sam replied.

"That is worse."

Sam closed the ledger and folded his hands on it.

"Well?"

Roy drank and set down the glass.

"They speak of terms now as if the mountain were a landlord and we its poor tenants."

"The mountain is no landlord."

"No," Roy said. "Landlords are easier. They may be argued with, flattered, cheated, or shot under the right conditions. The hills appear to ask different methods."

Sam let that sit a moment.

"Well?"

Roy shrugged, but not carelessly.

"If we remain by permission where we first came by presumption, what sort of standing is that for men like us?"

"An honest one," Sam said.

Roy did not like the answer, but neither did he dismiss it.

The country repeated its warning in practical ways too.

On the third morning after the parley, a pair of laborers grazing burros too far from the center found the animals later unharmed, driven back toward camp but stripped of packsaddles and bells. Nothing else had been taken. No shots had been fired. The meaning was plain enough: remain nearer your own lines. The country would not consent to Birchville's quiet expansion merely because the town had become accustomed to itself.

That afternoon Haskins came into the Beans' place with dust to his knees and sat down near the counter without ordering anything.

"You look like bad news," Roy said.

Haskins shook his head. "Not bad. Repeated."

"That is generally how bad news behaves."

Haskins ignored him and addressed Sam.

"Found three fresh cuttings above the north draw. Somebody's still ranging out for timber as if warnings were only stories for other men."

"Miller's crowd?"

"Likely enough, or fools near enough to them that the difference don't signify."

Sam swore softly.

Roy looked between the two men.

"And if they continue?"

Haskins leaned back and stretched his long legs.

"Then the hills continue also."

That same evening a freighter came in from the south road with his team short and his patience shorter. He reported that the talk below had begun turning against Birchville. Men in Mesilla and the valley settlements were saying the camp was rich in gold and poor in judgment; that it was holding

only by stubbornness; that a prudent man might still make something there for a time, but a prudent man did not much desire to tie his future to a place where every ridge seemed to have taken sides.

The report injured the camp more than a few rifle shots might have done.

Mining towns are sustained not only by ore, but by belief. Men must believe another wagon will come, another buyer appear, another strike be made, another season improve matters. Once belief is weakened, every inconvenience grows teeth.

The practical merchants gathered in the Buckhorn that night, and to this meeting Sam was invited not because they loved him but because he knew arithmetic, and arithmetic is often the last form of truth men consult when pride has exhausted itself.

Roy went too, though he had no standing there except kinship and his own refusal to remain outside any room where consequential talk was being done.

The Buckhorn smelled of smoke, wet wool, spilled whiskey, and the sour fatigue that settles over men after danger too long expected. Lamps cast warm patches on the thick adobe walls. Outside, the mountain darkened under a restless sky.

At the table sat the Buckhorn proprietor, two merchants, the blacksmith, Haskins, and a stooped freighter named Delaney who had come to speak for the road men.

Delaney wasted little time.

"It costs more now to come up from the valley than you fellows seem willing to admit," he said. "Not only in coin, though that part's bad enough. Drivers don't favor roads that turn uncertain. Teamsters hear stories same as miners. A camp may outface fear a spell, but freight won't."

The Buckhorn proprietor frowned.

"You saying the road closes?"

"I'm saying the road names its own price."

"And that is?"

Delaney named it. The room went still.

One of the merchants let out a low whistle.

"That would near double transport."

"Near enough," Delaney replied. "And more if another outfit refuses the haul."

The Buckhorn proprietor swore under his breath.

"That'll kill half the trade in camp."

"No," Sam said quietly. "It will reveal how much of the trade was already dying and merely had not yet admitted it."

Roy, sitting back with one ankle on the opposite knee, glanced at him sidelong.

"There are hours when your companionship is a singular discouragement."

Sam did not smile.

Delaney went on. "I'll haul what I've contracted while road and reason permit. But others are already saying no."

The blacksmith tapped ash from his pipe.

"The question before us is whether the camp can live under the terms the hills are setting—not whether we enjoy them."

One of the merchants snorted.

"You speak as if they're magistrates."

"No," said Haskins. "I speak as if they've the advantage and know what they're defending."

The Buckhorn proprietor rubbed his beard.

"What then? We tell every man in town where he may cut, how far he may ride, how close he must keep his stock? You expect miners to hear that and smile?"

"I expect them to hear it," said Haskins, "or die deaf."

The talk ran in circles for nearly an hour, but out of it came the nearest thing Birchville had yet had to policy. Outlying timber cutting was to cease for the present. Stock was to remain nearer the camp. Diggings too far to be readily supported were to be abandoned. No armed party was to ride out except by common consent and for clear necessity. Watches were to continue. The old cannon was to remain in Main Street. And Delaney, for a higher rate and firmer promises of payment, would continue hauling so long as the road remained passable and the camp not wholly mad.

These were the terms of staying, though no one wrote them under that heading.

They were not peace. They were not victory. They were simply the rough conditions under which Birchville might continue pretending itself a town rather than admit itself only a question.

When the meeting broke up, Roy and Sam stepped into the cold street beneath a sky where the stars had not yet fully shown.

"Well," Roy said, drawing a long breath, "there is your treaty after all. Not with signatures and handshakes, but with dearer flour, shorter rides, and men forbidden to behave like idiots beyond a certain line."

Sam pulled on his gloves.

"Then it may be the best treaty Birchville is capable of."

Roy laughed softly, though not from mirth.

"You take a low view of human statesmanship."

"I take the view supplied by evidence."

They walked back toward the store. The town lay quieter than usual, not because fear had lessened, but because much of it had been used up in argument. From one cabin came the sound of a woman singing low to a child. Somewhere farther off a man coughed with the deep tearing cough of those who have long taken dust into their lungs. Lamps glowed in the Buckhorn windows. The cannon in the street threw a black, awkward shadow.

Near the store they found Miller waiting.

He stood with one shoulder against the porch post, hat low, beard touched red by the spill of lamplight from the door.

"So," he said as they approached, "you've done it."

"Done what?" asked Sam.

"Sold the camp by inches."

Roy sighed.

"It has been a long day, Miller. Could you not, for once, come armed with a fresher phrase?"

Miller ignored him.

"I hear you've put bounds on timber, bounds on grazing, bounds on where a man may ride. You and your careful friends would have us penned like stock while the hills decide what scraps we may keep."

Sam mounted the step and rested one hand on the rail.

"No. The hills decided long ago what country was theirs. We are only now beginning to notice."

That brought Miller forward a pace.

"You talk like a man half ashamed to be white."

Roy's expression changed at once, but Sam answered before he could.

"I talk," he said, "like a man not foolish enough to mistake trespass for destiny."

Miller's jaw worked.

"The camp will not hold by your kind of prudence."

"Perhaps not," Sam said. "But it certainly won't hold by yours."

For a moment it seemed the quarrel must go farther. Roy had shifted slightly off to one side where the light caught one cheek and left the rest of him in shadow. Miller saw him there and thought better, for the time being, of pressing matters to a physical end.

"This ain't over," he muttered.

Roy answered with quiet cheerfulness.

"That, Miller, is the first truth you've spoken tonight."

Miller turned away with a curse and went off down the street toward the Buckhorn, where men of his sort gather after argument to reassure one another that reason is cowardice when it opposes them.

Roy watched him go.

"He will not abide by these terms."

"No," said Sam.

"Nor will those nearest him."

"No."

Roy climbed the porch and stood beside Sam in the doorway.

"Then what have we gained?"

Sam looked out over the dark street, the wagon shadows, the heavy line of the Buckhorn, the cannon, the fresh graves on the rise, and the timbered mountain watching from every side.

"Time," he said at last.

Roy considered that.

"Sometimes time feels a poor bargain."

"It is the only one left to many men," said Sam.

They went inside and barred the door for the night.

Later, when the lamps had been turned low and the store lay still except for the quiet settling of planks and glass, Roy spoke once more from his cot in the rear room.

"Sam?"

"Yes."

"If the town keeps these terms, does it live?"

Sam lay looking into the dark a while before answering.

"It endures," he said. "That is not the same thing."

"And if it breaks them?"

"Then it learns faster what it is standing on."

Roy was silent after that.

Outside, Birchville slept by fits and starts beneath the tall pines. Watches moved softly through Main Street. Now and again a horse shifted at the line, or the wind touched some loose board and made it knock. Beyond the last cabin the mountain kept its own silence, stern and patient, as though it had all the time in the world to test the truth of men's arrangements.

And in that silence, the terms of staying rested lightly over the camp—less a promise than a pause, less a settlement than a narrow ledge on which Birchville had chosen, for the time being, to balance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Town Behind Walls

If Birchville had once fancied itself a camp rising toward townhood, it now seemed bent on becoming a town that had lost faith in open ground.

No order announced the change. No bell was rung. No broadside was nailed to a post declaring that from such-and-such an hour the place must think less of itself as a field of opportunity and more as a pocket of endurance. Yet a man could see the difference plainly enough in the way the days arranged themselves. What had been scattered was drawn inward. What had stood light and temporary grew thicker and more guarded. The camp, without ceasing to be rough, had become cautious; and caution, long practiced under pressure, gives even the rudest settlement something of the aspect of a fort.

By the end of that week there was no cabin in the central line of Birchville that had not been altered for defense. Lower walls were banked with ore sacks, split logs, meal barrels, or whatever else a man could find stout enough to stop a ball or at least weaken its temper. Loopholes had been cut in plank and adobe alike, some clever, some awkward, most ugly. Main Street itself, if so uncertain a track deserved the title, had been narrowed in places by wagon beds, breastworks, timber piles, and stacked goods set where they might shelter men in a rush. The horse lines had been shortened and moved closer to the center. Even the open spaces between cabins had acquired that look of wary calculation by which fear tries to make geography answer to it.

The mountain did not change. The pines still stood on the ridges in dark order. The creek still muttered over stone below the camp. Evening still touched the slopes as though nothing had happened there to alter the old habits of light and weather. But the men had changed, and by changing they had altered the very look of the place they inhabited.

Sam Bean saw this with the clear displeasure of a man who values order but not the sort born of anxiety. He stood one morning at the doorway of the store, hands clasped behind his back, watching three miners drag a wagon axle and two meal barrels into place before a cabin opposite.

"They'll not be content," he said, "till every house in camp resembles a mule corral built by lunatics."

Roy, seated on the porch rail and mending a cue tip with far more care than he generally bestowed upon himself, looked up.

"A mule corral may be a great comfort to a mule."

"Then perhaps," Sam said, "you should relocate to one if it suits your understanding of architecture."

Roy smiled.

"I would, but there's no billiard table in it."

That was Roy's way still, though a quieter version of it than Birchville had first received. He jested because it was his habit, and because a man who has long made his advantage out of quickness, charm, and surface will reach for those tools even after deeper impressions have begun working on him. Yet Sam noticed, as he noticed nearly everything, that Roy no longer laughed so easily at the camp's fear. He still liked the room lively. He still liked cards, bottles, and the noise men make when they are trying

to prove they have not yet been mastered by circumstance. But he had seen the woman and children in the timber. He had heard the old man's words in the parley. He knew now that Birchville's quarrel was not some frontier melodrama laid on for the entertainment of saloon men and story-seekers. That knowledge had begun to work in him whether he welcomed it or not.

The Beans' store and saloon bore the altered atmosphere more plainly with each day.

There was still trade enough, for camps do not cease wanting coffee, flour, tobacco, powder, rope, or drink merely because danger has grown intimate. Yet the business had changed in spirit. Men came armed as a matter of routine now, not because they intended violence indoors, but because no one liked the feel of being separated from the only object in camp he trusted to answer when called upon. Rifles leaned in corners. Pistols rested on counters. Knives flashed where once only coin or dust had shown. Conversation seldom ranged far from the condition of the road, the cost of freight, the nearness of the watches, the uncertainty of outlying cabins, and the question—always present even when unspoken—of how long Birchville could continue under such terms and still call itself worth the holding.

Even the billiard table had taken on a different office. Roy still brushed it carefully. He still insisted on decent play where he could enforce it. He still frowned upon men setting bottles on the rails or cards on the felt. But the games now were shorter, tighter, and watched more closely by those not playing, as if every click of ivory balls against one another had become a little act of defiance against the camp's coarsening reality. Men wanted the sound. It suggested, if only for a few moments, that there remained some corner of Birchville where the world still obeyed clear rules and visible lines.

One evening, while a pair of Cornish miners played under Roy's supervision and the room stood thick with lamp smoke and damp wool, a young freighter newly up from below said aloud:

"It's a fine thing, this, to have such gentlemanly amusement in the middle of a siege."

Roy, chalking a cue, glanced at him.

"It is not a siege," he said. "It is a disagreement conducted with mountain air and poor manners."

The room laughed more than the remark deserved, because laughter had grown scarce enough to be welcomed where found. Sam, writing behind the counter, did not look up.

"You encourage them," he said.

"I sell them intervals," Roy answered.

"Intervals are not inventory."

"No," Roy said, "but they are useful merchandise."

Intervals were useful at the Buckhorn too, though the Buckhorn offered them in its own fashion.

If the Beans' place felt like a room forever deciding whether it was chiefly a store pretending at sociability or a saloon borrowing respectability from shelves of goods, the Buckhorn made a broader claim. Its thicker walls, wider rooms, and greater air of permanence had from the first given it an advantage over the lighter, hastier structures in Birchville. Men spoke of it now almost as if it were an old institution rather than a recent piece of adobe ambition. It had become, by accident of construction and the force of circumstances, the nearest thing the camp possessed to a public house, a refuge, and an assembly hall all at once.

By day it served meals, gossip, and bargaining. By night it offered cards, bottles, and the kind of conversation men prefer when they do not wish to admit they are afraid and therefore gather in

company to hide the fact from one another. Since the first attack, it had also become one of the few places women trusted more than the open cabins if the street began speaking in rifle fire again.

Roy and Sam crossed to it often enough, sometimes on business, sometimes from necessity, sometimes simply because every serious matter in Birchville eventually passed through the Buckhorn whether it was invited or not.

On a cold evening toward week's end, the brothers crossed Main Street just as a gust of mountain wind drove smoke low along the roofs. Inside, the lamps burned warmly against the adobe walls, and for a moment the whole room managed to suggest not frontier strain but aspiration. The bar shone with use. Mirrors caught and multiplied light. Rough men sat at tables trying, by the angle of a hat or the care with which a glass was raised, to remember manners acquired elsewhere or imagined from books. A fiddle played in the farther room. From above, where the loft and hall gave the place its "opera house" dignity, there came the faint echo of voices and footsteps, as if the building itself wished to persuade those gathered below that it stood for something more than whiskey and worry.

Yet the illusion never lasted long. Rifles rested in corners. A wounded man coughed at one table. Near the rear wall two merchants spoke in low urgent tones over freight costs and thinning custom. The Buckhorn proprietor polished glasses with more vigor than cleanliness required and every little while glanced toward the door, a habit he had not possessed two weeks earlier. Above the piano, a patched place in the plaster still showed where a ball from the recent fighting had struck.

Roy took all this in and said under his breath, "A palace, if a man is prepared to lower his standards to necessity."

Sam removed his gloves.

"Necessity," he said, "is the architect of half the buildings in this territory and most of the decisions made inside them."

They took a table not far from the wall. Haskins joined them shortly, then the blacksmith, and after him Ortega the teamster, who, by the mere fact of having ridden on the parley and returned alive, had acquired a modest reputation larger than he wanted. The proprietor sent coffee for Sam and whiskey for Roy without being asked, having decided that this arrangement best summarized the brothers.

For a time they spoke of smaller matters: a load of meal overdue from below, the bad luck of a claim near the north cut, the weather on the ridge, a rumor that fresh color had shown in a higher wash. But no room in Birchville remained long given over to small matters.

It was the blacksmith who said at last, "This town is beginning to live like a fort."

Haskins shrugged.

"It always was one. Only too vain to admit it."

Roy turned his glass slowly on the table.

"There is a certain discourtesy in making a man confess what he preferred to style differently."

"No discourtesy in the thing itself," said Haskins. "Only in the delay."

The Buckhorn proprietor drifted near, having plainly heard enough to join them whether asked or no.

"A fort pays poorly," he said. "A fort drinks, yes, and sometimes overpays for supper. But a fort does not prosper. Men with families don't bring them to a fort. Freight charges a fort more. Entertainments dry up. Trade narrows to what can be eaten, fired, drunk, or buried."

Roy looked around the room as the fiddler struck a livelier turn and two men at the far table began slapping cards with unnecessary cheer.

"And yet," he said, "here we are conducting ourselves with remarkable flourish."

The proprietor snorted.

"Flourish is cheap. Flour is dear."

That won a short laugh, but only a short one.

Sam had said little. He sat with his coffee untouched, watching the room. Watching was his truest talent. He saw how men grouped themselves now less by ease than by affinity and fear. Miller sat in one rear corner with three others, speaking low and leaning in, a knot of grievance half hidden by smoke. Near the bar, two merchants and a freighter kept company in the practical fellowship of those bound by supply and scarcity. At another table four miners played cards, but one had set himself so he could watch both the door and the stairs. Even in diversion Birchville no longer forgot itself. The camp had brought its walls inside.

"You are counting factions again," Roy said quietly.

"I am counting outcomes."

"And how many are there?"

Sam looked at him.

"Fewer every day."

A burst of laughter rose from the stair just then, and all eyes turned briefly. Two men came down from the loft arguing over whether the upper hall might be made fit for some sort of Saturday gathering if the benches were cleared and the lamps properly trimmed. One said there ought to be music and perhaps a recitation, to prove the camp had not forgotten civilization. The other said civilization was expensive and apt to spill candle wax on borrowed furniture.

Roy watched them with visible amusement.

"There," he said softly. "That is the Buckhorn entire. One room thinks itself a citadel while the room above tries to be a theater."

"Both," said Sam, "are forms of defense."

Roy considered that.

"Yes," he said after a moment. "I believe you are right."

Later that same evening, after more men had come in from the diggings and the room had thickened into its fuller night character, Miller rose from his corner and crossed toward the brothers' table. He wore his grievance by then as naturally as another man wears a limp.

"So," he said, standing over them, "comfortable in here while the rest of town builds walls?"

Roy leaned back in his chair.

"If I were comfortable, Miller, you would be the first difficulty in the way of it."

Miller ignored him and addressed Sam.

"You and your careful friends have turned the camp inward. Men hardly cut a stick now without asking whether the hills approve."

"The hills," Sam said, "have shown what follows when men cut what they please as if no life preceded them here."

Miller's lip curled.

"That kind of talk wins you no friends."

Sam drank at last of his now-cold coffee.

"I have noticed truth is selective in its company."

The blacksmith shifted in his chair, sensing the nearness of trouble, but Miller did not yet explode. He had another purpose.

"There are cabins farther north still occupied," he said. "A man ought to have the right to defend what he built."

"A man ought first to ask by what right he built where he did," Haskins said.

Miller swung toward him.

"And you? You going to start preaching titles now? We found gold. We built. That's the title."

"No," Haskins said. "That's the action. Title is another matter."

The Buckhorn proprietor had drifted nearer, drying the same glass so long it must have gone from wet to polished and back again. Around the room talk lowered. Men always know when another man's temper is reaching for a weapon even before the hand itself has chosen one.

Roy, observing all this, smiled faintly.

"Take care, Miller," he said. "You'll begin another committee merely by standing."

That drew a few stray grins, enough to break the line of the moment. Miller saw it, disliked it, and altered course.

"This camp cannot live penned forever," he said. "Men did not come up here to sit beneath cannon and preach apology."

Sam set down the cup.

"No," he said. "They came to take what they thought the mountain owed them. The question now is whether they can stay long enough to learn otherwise."

Miller stared at him a moment longer, then said, "A town behind walls is half beaten already."

He went back to his corner.

No one answered him at once. It was the Buckhorn proprietor who finally said, "Maybe so. But a town that won't use walls when it needs them may be wholly beaten before supper."

That restored the room to motion. Cards resumed. The fiddler took up again. Someone ordered stew. Someone else swore he had seen fresh color in the north cut and would prove it come morning if only Birchville had not grown timid at the edge of every tree. Thus the Buckhorn returned to its mixed office—part refuge, part saloon, part stage where men rehearsed ordinary life while fear sat in the gallery and watched.

When the brothers stepped back into Main Street later, the cold had sharpened. Lamps burned behind thickened windows. From the rise above town the graves showed only as darker humps against the dark. The cannon stood where it had stood all week, an ugly reassurance. Somewhere near the horse line a sentry coughed and stamped his feet.

Roy pulled on his gloves and looked up at the pines black against the stars.

"A town behind walls," he said. "There is little music in the phrase."

"No," Sam answered.

"Yet it is true."

"Yes."

Roy walked a little farther before speaking again.

"I had thought the walls would be made of timber, sacks, wagons, and adobe."

"And now?"

Roy turned his collar against the cold.

"Now I think some are made of pride, some of fear, and some of the stories men tell themselves so they may remain where they are not easy in remaining."

Sam gave him one of his rare sidelong looks that came near approval.

"You improve," he said.

Roy laughed softly.

"Do not say so too plainly. It may encourage vanity."

They reached the store and mounted the porch. Before going in, Sam looked back once more across Main Street toward the Buckhorn, its warm windows, its thick walls, its card players and frightened men pretending at refinement, and beyond that toward the cabins banked and braced like poor works of war.

Birchville endured.

But it endured now like a place holding breath.

And above it, beneath the tall pines, the mountain kept its own counsel, waiting to see whether walls built by anxious hands could preserve what ambition had raised faster than wisdom could govern.

CHAPTER NINE

The Leaving Kind

There are towns that rise by labor and hold by habit, and there are camps that spring up by rumor and remain only so long as hope outruns judgment. Birchville, in that season, belonged more to the latter sort than the former, though none living in it would have thanked a man for saying so plain.

The walls had gone up. The watches had been set. The cannon stood black in Main Street like some old iron witness too stubborn to move and too useful, in men's minds at least, to discard. Men still washed for gold in Bear Creek, still hauled timber where they dared, still drank, traded, gamed, cursed, and argued beneath the same pines that had watched them come. Yet something had altered more deeply than the outward arrangements of the camp. The place had begun to thin at the edges.

It happened in the old frontier manner—not by proclamation, nor by any general acknowledgment that the venture had turned costly in flesh and nerve, but by departures small enough at first to be dismissed and frequent enough soon after to resist dismissal.

The first to go that week were a Mexican family from near Santa Rita who had kept to the eastern side of town in a low cabin banked with sacks and brush. The man worked quietly at the diggings and had never boasted over a strike. The woman washed and baked for half the central line and was better liked than most of the men who paid her late. They had stayed longer than some because they had no easy place else to go, and because the husband, like so many others, had once believed that one good week in Bear Creek might yet set all difficulty right.

But good weeks had grown scarce, roads uncertain, and the sound in the hills after Miller's burning of the cache had changed from warning to something less patient.

They loaded in daylight.

No one in camp could pretend otherwise. The little wagon stood before their cabin by midmorning. Blankets were rolled. Pots packed. Tools tied down. A cradle wedged among sacks of meal and two straight-backed chairs. The woman moved through the work with the economy of one who had already argued the matter with herself and found no use in reopening it for onlookers. The man said little. His face was not ashamed, only tired.

Half the street watched without admitting to it.

Roy stood on the porch of the store with a cup of coffee he had forgotten to drink and said, "They don't even mean to pretend."

"No," said Sam. "That stage is passed."

A boy from the next cabin over helped lift a chest into the wagon. The mother thanked him. Another woman from farther down pressed two wrapped biscuits into the hand of the smallest child. The father settled the mule traces, climbed to the seat, and only then did one of the camp's harder voices break the silence.

"Running, are you?" Briscoe called from near the horse line.

The miner turned his head once and answered in a level voice.

"No. Leaving."

Then he touched the reins and went on.

It was such a small distinction, and yet it struck the whole street harder than if he had cursed them. Running was for cowards and could therefore be scorned. Leaving was something else. Leaving implied conclusion. It suggested that a man had measured the thing and found it wanting.

By dinner it was known all over camp that another family had gone, and by supper the matter had already been sorted into opinions. Miller called it weakness. The Buckhorn proprietor called it bad for trade. The women called it sense, though not always aloud. Haskins called it arithmetic, which sounded heartless until one considered that the camp itself had already begun to reduce everything to the same.

Sam said very little. He had no need. He was already keeping a second ledger in his head besides the one on his table: not just accounts of flour, powder, and tobacco, but accounts of confidence, traffic, departures, and how many men now asked after the road before they asked after the diggings. To him the family's leaving was not only one more subtraction. It was proof that the camp had begun to understand itself.

The next departure came less openly.

That evening, long after most honest trade had thinned and the saloon side had taken over the room's noise, Roy stepped outside merely to cool himself after an argument over whiskey and found, in the alley behind a neighboring store, the shuttered glow of a lantern and the careful creak of wheels.

A merchant named Peebles was packing wagons.

He had chosen the rear of his building and an hour after dark because he hoped to preserve the appearance of staying even while undoing it. Crates of coffee, bolts of cloth, two barrels, and a chest of ledgers were already loaded. The man himself moved with the clumsy secrecy of one not practiced at being caught.

Roy stood in the dark a moment and watched, then went back inside.

"Well?" Sam asked, seeing something in his face.

"There goes another patriot," Roy said.

Sam came to the porch and looked without comment.

Peebles wrestled a keg up into the wagon, nearly dropped it, swore under his breath, then turned sharply as if feeling eyes on him. Even at that distance Roy could read the expression plain enough. It was not exactly guilt. It was the look of a man who has discovered too late that necessity makes no allowance for speeches previously given.

"He'll be off before dawn," Roy said.

"Yes."

"He was loud enough last week on holding fast."

"Yes."

Roy leaned one shoulder against the post.

"This camp breeds hypocrites faster than gold."

"No," said Sam. "It only strips the paint from them quicker."

That line pleased Roy in spite of himself, though he did not show it much. His mood had grown too mixed for easy amusement. Each man who left now seemed to him both sensible and accusing.

The next day the phrase was spoken.

It happened near noon in the Beans' place and by one of the older miners who had never been greatly given either to boasting or to speech. His name was Kearney. He had a gray beard, a scar under one eye from older work in Sonora, and the patient worn look of a man who had spent enough years in camps to know the difference between hardship that might yet pay and hardship that had already begun asking more than any strike could return.

He came in for tobacco, stood at the counter while Sam weighed it, and listened without pleasure to two younger men disputing whether the camp ought to answer its losses with another strong ride north. One said the hills must be taught respect. The other said the road would fill again once men below heard Birchville had shown spirit.

Kearney spat into the sawdust bucket and said in the driest voice in the room:

"A man's scalp is more valuable than gold in these hills."

The place went still.

It was not poetry that caught them, though there was some rough strength in the line. It was the hard, plain fit of it to everything men had been trying not to say. Gold had brought them up. Gold had excused the first danger, the first discomfort, the first overreach, the first dead man, the first delay in freight, the first walls, the first shrinking of movement, the first wrongs answered badly and the second ones committed worse. But there comes a point in every honest reckoning when the sums no longer lie between a man and his hoped-for fortune, but between his skin and what he may yet carry away before losing it.

Roy, who had been drying a glass, set it down slowly.

Kearney took his tobacco, laid down the coin, and added, "That's all I have to say on Birchville."

Then he went out.

No one answered him in the room. Yet by dusk half the camp had heard the phrase, and by suppertime the other half had repeated it, improved it, resented it, or inwardly accepted it.

At the Buckhorn a freighter said he was damned if he would let an old miner teach him courage with proverbs. Yet later in the same room the proprietor was heard muttering the line over his accounts. Near the creek a woman used it while folding shirts. A teamster repeated it at the horse line and then crossed himself as if the truth of it embarrassed him. By the next morning boys were saying it in the street without understanding it, which is when a phrase has truly taken hold in a place.

Even Miller heard it and mocked it.

"Scalp talk is for men already half gone," he said.

But the mockery rang hollow, because the town could count as well as hear. Empty cabins, fewer buyers, more barter, less confidence, and a road that seemed every day longer in both directions—these things were beginning to weigh against even the loudest man's pride.

For Sam Bean the phrase did not create a conclusion. It named one already made.

He had been carrying it inwardly for days, perhaps longer. The second ledger. The failed freight. The thinning trade. The shrinking margins between profit and risk. The burned cache. The signal fires. The changed silence in the hills. The way practical men now asked road questions before they asked mining questions. All of it had been reducing itself in him toward a single clear understanding. Kearney's sentence merely gave public words to the private sum.

That afternoon Sam went into the rear room, opened both ledgers, and sat a long while with them. He checked figures already checked, inventories already known, debts not worth collecting, credits still owed below, flour, coffee, tobacco, powder, lead, rope, canvas, boots, lamp oil, and what could be broken down or loaded with speed if speed were all that lay between order and trouble.

Roy came in from the front room some while later and found both books open and Sam looking not at the page but at the far wall.

"Well?" Roy asked, though he knew well enough what kind of quiet this was.

Sam closed the second ledger.

"Another family. Another merchant loading in the dark. Men buying only enough to get three days farther than yesterday. Freight not yet come. The room thinner each week. How much more do you need counted?"

"That is not an answer."

Sam looked up at him.

"No. It is all the answers together."

Roy stood a moment, then came farther in. The front room beyond the open door still looked like a room that might be saved by one good evening—bottles in order, the table level, shelves not yet bare, the familiar arrangement of light and wood that had once seemed to him nearly enough to hold a town together by itself.

He said, "You're measuring us now."

"I have been since the first empty cabin."

Roy gave a faint mirthless smile.

"And how do we stand in your admirable arithmetic?"

Sam's face did not alter.

"Not yet on the road," he said. "But no longer of the camp in the way we were."

That unsettled Roy more than he liked. He went back out to the bar and spent the next hour moving bottles that did not require moving, asking after debts he already knew, and watching the room with that particular restlessness that comes over a man when a truth has entered him and found no proper resting place yet.

The room itself had changed again by then. More barter, less dust. More talk of roads, less talk of rich cuts. A prospector from the lower wash bought only tobacco and asked after the safety of Mesilla. Another man offered a pick, a blanket, and a saddle for a sack of flour and two bottles. The gamblers still circled, but even they had grown meaner in their expectations, as if the whole town's luck were souring in the cards as much as in the creek.

Late in the afternoon Delaney came in at last from the south road, alone and on horseback rather than with freight.

Men noticed at once.

Sam looked up from the ledger. Roy came round from the bar.

"Well?" said Roy.

Delaney took off his hat and rubbed a red line from his brow.

"No wagon. Not this trip."

That answer carried through the room like a dropped weight.

"Turned back?" Sam asked.

"Didn't start. One driver refused the road. Another's team's short. Word below is the district's gone uncertain worse than before. Folks are saying Birchville's a place where a man might still make money if he's already half dead to caution."

Roy said, "That is a colorful recommendation."

Delaney looked at him tiredly.

"It means better men are staying away."

No one argued that.

After Delaney left, the room did not recover its tone. Men still drank, but more silently. Haskins stood by the wall and smoked. The Buckhorn proprietor sent a boy over for coffee and did not come himself. Two miners who had been discussing a fresh cut fell into talk instead of whether there was any sense staying another week.

Roy heard all of it.

At dusk Peebles rolled out after all. Not at midnight, not in secret, but under a deepening sky with two lanterns on the wagon and too much weariness in him to care who saw. Some men watched from the Buckhorn porch. Some from doorways. A few muttered "coward." More said nothing.

Miller called after him, "Road's wide enough for men who've forgot their stomach."

Peebles did not turn his head.

He only raised one hand once and drove on.

Roy watched the wagon disappear into the southward dim and said to Sam, "That makes three in as many days."

"More," said Sam. "Only some haven't yet put wheels to it."

The truth of that showed itself everywhere. More shuttered places by morning. Less smoke from certain chimneys. Fewer horses needing shoes. Less washing taken in. Even the sound of the town had altered. There were still arguments enough, but the heedless laughter of a boom camp beginning to believe in itself had gone out of Birchville and been replaced by a harder, sparser sound.

One night at the Buckhorn the proprietor stood over his book and said, "Danger I can abide better than dwindling. Danger at least keeps a man alert. Dwindling makes a fool of every plan."

Sam answered, "Because danger may be answered in an hour. Dwindling answers every day."

Roy, who heard that, carried it away with him whether he meant to or not.

By then even he could feel the road waiting.

That night, after closing, he found Sam at the rear table with the second ledger open and both lamps turned low. Figures lay down the page in Sam's narrow hand—stock, debts, credits, values, packable goods, and the shadow-arithmetic of what a man might yet save if he moved in time.

"How many?" Roy asked.

Sam knew at once what he meant.

"If the pattern holds? Enough."

"That is not a number."

"It is the truest one available."

Roy folded his arms.

"How many have gone already?"

Sam ran a finger down the page.

"Four households certain. Six lone men. Two traders of consequence. One freighter who says he means to return and will not."

Roy blew out a breath.

"And us?"

Sam closed the book.

"We have not gone."

"That is not what I asked."

"No," Sam said. "But it is what I know."

Roy sat back and looked toward the front room. The shelves still stood decently stocked. The billiard cues still hung in their place. The bottles caught the low light in orderly rows. The room had once looked to him like opportunity furnished in wood and glass. Now it looked like an arrangement that might one morning be broken down, loaded, bartered off, or left for whoever came after.

At last he said, "I do not care to be thought the leaving kind."

Sam's expression did not change.

"Most men who leave do not think so either."

Roy gave a short unhappy laugh.

"You rob every phrase of heroism."

"There is little heroism in staying too long for appearance."

Roy rose and went to the doorway. Outside, Birchville lay quiet beneath the stars. A sentry moved near the horse line. Somewhere a child coughed in sleep. The Buckhorn's upper window still showed light, soft and gold against the dark. Beyond the last cabin the pines stood black and patient on the slopes, as if they had watched many such comings and goings and were never much impressed by either.

Roy remained there till Sam had put away the ledger and lowered the lamp.

"Sam?"

"Yes."

"When a place begins to lose people in earnest, can it come back?"

Sam joined him at the door and looked out over the same dark street.

"Sometimes," he said. "If what drew them first still proves stronger than what drove them off."

"And here?"

Sam was quiet a long moment.

"At Birchville," he said at last, "men came for gold. But they are learning the price is not only measured in ounces."

Roy nodded slightly, though whether in agreement or resignation even he might not have known.

Outside, the town held on in the mountain cold, reduced by one more day's subtraction, still standing, still lit in places, still pretending to itself that endurance and success were the same thing.

But among the cabins, stores, horse lines, and poor works thrown up in fear, a slow unmistakable sorting had begun—the kind that comes over every frontier camp when the dream first outpaces the man's willingness to pay for it.

Some were the staying kind.

Some were the leaving kind.

And the Beans, though neither had yet spoken the matter plain, had begun at last to feel the road waiting for them in the dark.

CHAPTER TEN

The Price of Pride

The trouble with a town that has been frightened and not broken is that it begins, after a little while, to imagine itself stronger than the lesson intended.

Birchville had held. It had buried its dead, raised its walls, shortened its lines, watched its roads, and endured the leaving of those whose judgment or fear had outrun their greed. It had, by force of necessity, accepted certain terms of staying which no man loved but many obeyed because no better arrangement presented itself. For a brief span this obedience—grudging, imperfect, and mocked by some—had preserved the place from a worse calamity.

Yet among the harder sort there grew all the while another interpretation.

They said the town had endured because it had shown resolve. They said the cannon in Main Street had spoken more persuasively than the parley. They said the walls, the watches, the armed men, and the refusal to abandon claims had proven that Birchville need only stand firmer and strike harder to secure its place. In every saloon, over every card table, beneath every boast offered to hide uneasiness, this notion thickened. Miller fed it wherever he went.

He did not preach openly at first. Men who mean mischief and wish companions in it rarely begin by naming folly under its proper title. They speak instead of spirit, self-respect, and the danger of appearing weak before those who would test them. They ask what becomes of a town if it lets others set its bounds. They wonder aloud whether caution is not merely fear dressed in sober language. They choose their hearers well: wounded men, shamed men, idle men, and all whose pride has outrun their prudence.

So it was that one evening, while the Buckhorn hummed with cards, coffee, and the strained cheer that passes in mining camps for ordinary life, Miller sat in the farther room with four others and laid out his notion over a bottle and a smoking lamp.

The men with him were the sort one would expect. There was Briscoe, scar down one cheek and a mind inclined toward hardness whenever thought would have served better. There was Tate, too young for caution and too old to learn it cheaply. Mercer, who said little, listened much, and tended always toward whatever opinion most flattered his sense of himself. Farnell, who had sworn more than once that he feared neither Apache nor angel and had since taken to sleeping with his rifle across his blankets. Others drifted through the conversation, but these remained at its center.

Miller leaned over the table, one hand flat beside the bottle.

"I tell you," he said, "the camp is being taught to cringe. First they take horses. Then they fire into town. Then they tell us where we may cut timber, where we may graze, how far we may range before dark. And now half the place thanks them for the privilege of being instructed."

Briscoe drank and wiped his beard with the back of his hand.

"What's your answer?"

"My answer," Miller said, "is that a thing once taken must be answered in kind—or more."

Tate's eyes lit at once. "You mean another ride?"

"A proper one this time. Quick. Chosen men. No crowd of fools charging into the first wash they see. We know enough now of the draws and signs where little camps have been seen. We go, strike one clean, burn what can be burned, ruin what feeds them, and come back before noon."

"That'd show them," Tate said.

"Yes," said Miller. "It would show them Birchville still means to stand."

Mercer, who had been staring into his cup, lifted his head.

"And if Sam Bean hears of it?"

Miller's lip curled. "Then Sam Bean may object from his porch with both hands full of arithmetic."

There was laughter at that, low and mean.

None of them saw Roy in the doorway beyond, though he had heard enough.

He had come only to collect a debt or perhaps to drag a fiddler back across to the Beans' place—later he could not have said which—but Miller's voice had held him there. He remained partly in shadow, listening, his face unreadable.

After a moment he withdrew and crossed the street under a sky of hard stars to the store, where Sam sat alone at the rear table with both ledgers open before him and the lamp trimmed low.

Roy closed the door behind him and stood a moment with his gloves still on.

"Well?" said Sam, without looking up.

"There is to be another gallant endeavor," Roy answered.

That brought Sam's eyes up at once.

"Whose?"

"Miller's. And those nearest his fever."

Sam laid down the pencil.

"How soon?"

"Soon enough that they mean to outrun argument."

That was bad, and both knew it.

Sam rose at once, took his coat, and went out without another word. Roy followed.

They found Miller near the north edge of camp where the cabins thinned and shadow pooled between timber braces, wagon hulks, and fresh works thrown up for defense. Two horses already stood saddled near the blacksmith's shed, and beyond them a mule shifted under a pack that held more powder than prospecting required. Miller was speaking low with Briscoe when Sam came straight through the dark toward him.

"No," Sam said before either man could begin.

Miller straightened. "No what?"

"No to whatever this is."

Briscoe looked from one to the other and then a little away, as lesser men do when stronger quarrels claim the ground.

Miller folded his arms. "You've taken to forbidding much in this camp."

"I forbid nothing," Sam said. "I name consequences."

"That is merchant talk."

"That is survival talk."

Miller's face hardened.

"We're done surviving like penned stock. A town that lets itself be hemmed and instructed ain't holding. It's lingering."

Sam stepped nearer.

"You strike into those hills again," he said, "and you will not be answering injury. You will be choosing something worse."

Miller laughed, though short and sharp.

"Worse? We've had worse since the first horse was drove off."

"No," Sam answered. "You've had warning, resistance, pressure, and enough blood to tell you the country objects. There is still measure in it. You mean to remove that measure."

Briscoe muttered, "Always there's a speech."

Sam ignored him.

"To burn a camp, ruin food, scatter stores, and call it honor—speak the thing plain, Miller. Don't dress it for the room."

At this Miller's temper, which had long rested one breath beneath the surface, showed itself clear.

"Honor?" he snapped. "What have you to say of honor? You would trade this camp's right to stand for a few more weeks of freight and quiet books. You sit there and call us trespassers as if a man's labor means nothing. We found gold. We built. We bled. That makes a claim."

"No," said Sam. "That makes an act. Claim is another matter."

Roy, standing a little behind and to one side, felt that phrase land as heavily as if Sam had struck the ground with iron. He knew too that Miller heard in it not argument, but insult dressed in calmness. It was one reason Sam so often won the truth of a room and lost its affection in the same breath.

Miller pointed toward the dark line of the hills.

"What do you propose, then? We ask permission every time a mule needs grazing? We thank them for not killing us by the dozen? We stay penned forever till every strong man leaves and the camp rots behind sacks and walls?"

"No," Sam said. "I propose that if men insist on staying, they do so without pretending the place was empty when they came, and without provoking a slaughter they cannot govern once begun."

There was a long silence after that.

Then Roy, to his own surprise more than any other's, spoke.

"If you go," he said to Miller, "what is it you hope to bring back besides smoke?"

Miller turned toward him. "Respect."

Roy's mouth moved in the ghost of a smile.

"Respect fetched from ashes is a curious article."

"You coming or not?" Miller said bluntly.

There it was at last. No more speeches. No more borrowed principles. Only the naked call to choose.

Roy felt the question land in him with all the old force. He saw, in one quick and uncomfortable instant, the image Miller meant to offer him: a rider in the dawn, armed, chosen, part of a company determined not merely to endure but to answer. It appealed to everything in Roy that had once loved danger for the shape it gave a story and the room it won a man afterward in the telling. He had never

been made for porch wisdom, and the blood still stirred at the thought of action even when the mind had begun to distrust the uses to which action was being put.

But alongside that image came another: the old Apache at the granite shoulder, Ortega's halting translation, the woman in the timber with the child on her hip, the second child holding to her skirt. Not a war cloud. Not camp rumor. Not a stage for frontier boasting. Home.

Roy looked from Miller to Sam and back again.

"No," he said at last. "Not for this."

Miller stared. "You choose him, then."

Roy's expression altered only slightly.

"No," he said. "I choose not to be a fool before breakfast."

Miller swore and turned away.

For a little while it seemed the warning might suffice. But when a proud man has been challenged in front of listeners, retreat becomes harder than danger. Miller had gone too far in his own mind to stop cleanly now, and the men around him had too much invested in the idea of boldness to let prudence save them.

By dawn the party had ridden out.

Six men in all. Miller at the front. Briscoe, Tate, Mercer, and two rough fellows from the north cut whose names mattered less than the spirit in which they rode. No white cloth now. No pretense of parley.

Haskins came to the Beans' place just after first light and said only, "They're gone."

Roy was already up, though he had slept little.

"How many?" he asked.

"Enough to do harm," Haskins said, "and not enough to survive much of it if the hills answer quick."

Sam took up his hat.

"No use," Haskins said. "They had near an hour on us before first light."

Sam stood with the hat in his hand, anger in him colder than flame.

"What route?"

"North draw first, likely. They mean to prove their manhood against something smaller than themselves."

Roy looked away at that.

The morning dragged beneath the weight of waiting. In such hours a camp becomes at once slower and more jumpy. Men ask needless questions, start at ordinary sounds, and carry on work badly because thought is elsewhere. Even those who approved the ride did so with the uneasy hunger of gamblers who have placed a large sum on another man's hand.

Near noon the first rider returned.

It was Tate, hatless, smoke-marked, and grinning in the foolish exhausted manner of one who has passed through danger and wants his trembling mistaken for triumph.

"We done it!" he shouted before he was properly in town. "Burned them out!"

That cry ran through Birchville like liquor through an empty belly.

Men came out from cabins, the Buckhorn, the smithy, the nearer diggings. Women stood in doorways. Boys darted forward till called back. Even those who mistrusted Miller wanted to hear what had been done, for no town remains indifferent when one of its factions has set fire to the surrounding dark.

By the time the rest rode in, the camp was gathered.

Miller sat straighter than he had in weeks. Briscoe had one cheek blackened with soot. Mercer looked less proud than shaken, though he tried to hide it in stiffness. One of the north-digging men carried a blanket-wrapped bundle lashed behind his saddle, and from its shape Sam knew at once it was no body.

"What have you done?" he asked, before the cheering could fully rise.

Miller looked down at him from the saddle.

"What should've been done earlier."

The story came in parts and none of the parts improved the whole. They had found a small camp up a narrow draw—brush shelters, cooking gear, hides, dried meat, gathered stores, pack goods hidden beneath boughs and stone. There had been only one old man there when they came upon it, with two ponies and no fighting company in sight. He had run or been driven off; the telling changed slightly according to which rider spoke. The shelters had been pulled down. The stores taken or ruined. The hides cut. The dried meat scattered. The place burned before they rode off.

"A winter cache," Haskins said quietly.

Miller heard him and snapped, "An enemy supply."

"No," Haskins answered. "A winter cache. You burned food."

The camp divided at once.

Some men cheered the riders. They shook hands, slapped shoulders, admired the seized ponies, and said at last Birchville had shown it would not be pressed without answer. The Buckhorn sent whiskey. Younger men and older fools shouted themselves hoarse.

Other men stood silent. The blacksmith folded his arms and said nothing, which in him was stronger than cursing. Ortega turned away from the street before the cheering was half through. Haskins remained where he was and looked north toward the hills as though already listening for the answer. Sam's face had gone so still that Roy knew him more angry than if he had shouted.

Roy himself felt no lift in it. The smoke on Miller's coat, the boasting over burned stores, the mention of an old man driven from a place of winter keeping—it all struck him not as victory but as something meaner than the camp wished to name.

Yet Birchville celebrated, if only briefly.

That evening the Buckhorn was fuller than it had been in a week. Men drank to restored courage, to Birchville's rights, to the humiliation of the hills, to the correction of all those who had spoken too much of limits. A fiddle played louder than before. Someone tried to sing and forgot the words halfway through. The whole room, warmed by whiskey and self-forgiveness, almost convinced itself the matter had turned.

Roy stood at the bar longer than he wanted, pouring for men he would rather have left thirsty.

"Well," said the Buckhorn proprietor, bustling in that special relief merchants feel when fear and revenue happen to coincide, "maybe the camp needed this."

Roy looked at him.

"Needed what?"

"A little heartening."

Roy set down the bottle.

"There are medicines," he said, "that rouse a man before they kill him."

The proprietor blinked, uncertain whether that was wit or warning.

At the rear table, Miller held court. Each telling of the ride improved it. The old man at the cache became by turns a scout, a sentry, or a decoy. The stored food became munitions. The little camp swelled beneath his language into something nearer a war post. Men who had not ridden nodded as if they had seen it all.

Sam remained only long enough to watch this rot at work. Then he stepped outside.

The air was knife-cold and smelled of pine and distant weather. He stood in Main Street near the old cannon and listened not to the music from the Buckhorn, but to the hills.

Haskins came and stood beside him.

"They'll have their cheer," he said.

"For an hour," Sam answered.

Haskins spat into the dust.

"They burned food, Sam. Not a war camp. Not munitions. Food. Whoever was willing to measure before will now measure less."

"Yes."

"They've guaranteed worse."

Sam said nothing, because there was nothing left to add that truth had not already supplied.

By full dark the first signs came.

They were small enough that only men used to mountain country noticed them at once. No movement showed on the nearer slopes where, in recent evenings, shadow figures had sometimes been glimpsed between trees. The little ordinary sounds beyond camp—the bell of some stray animal, the faint bark of a dog from an outlying place, the low irregular traffic of life along the upper draws—had ceased altogether. Silence lay over the ridges not as peace lies, but as held breath lies.

Then, high to the north, a point of light appeared.

It burned steady for some moments, then vanished.

A second answered farther west.

Then a third, fainter, farther still.

Signal fires.

They did not blaze. They spoke.

Men came out of the Buckhorn into the street, hats in hand, drink forgotten. Some cursed. Some stared. One of the younger celebrants laughed too loudly and was answered by no one. Roy stepped down from the Buckhorn porch and came to stand beside Sam without speaking.

On the eastern ridge a figure moved briefly against the moonlight and was gone. Then another lower down. Whether scouts, watchers, or merely shapes seen through the lens of fear, no one could say for certain. But every man in Birchville felt the same thing at once: the hills had heard and were answering in their own time.

The Buckhorn fiddle stopped in the middle of a measure.

Miller came out then, coat open, face flushed from drink and approval. He looked up at the signal fires and for one fleeting instant all his borrowed triumph left him. There it was—the naked cost. He saw it just as the others did: whatever had been achieved in the draw that morning had not secured the camp. It had widened the quarrel.

But pride is a stubborn creditor. Before anyone could speak, Miller said too loudly, "Let them light all the hills they please. Now they know we'll answer."

No one cheered that.

The practical men were already reckoning what a wider conflict would do to freight, to wintering, to any hope of stable trade. The women in the doorways were thinking of children, stores, and what more might be burned before snow. The older miners were remembering every place in camp where a determined party could strike if measure had indeed been thrown aside.

Roy watched the lights burn and die one by one.

"Well," he said softly enough that only Sam heard, "there is the price of pride."

Sam's gaze remained on the northern dark.

"No," he said. "Only the first payment."

They stood a long while after that, while the camp settled not into celebration now, but into a harder vigilance. Men checked rifles that had not left their reach all day. Horses were drawn closer. Watches doubled without waiting for formal order. Lamps were shaded. Doors barred. The Buckhorn's warm rooms, so lately noisy with confidence, took on again the hard inward posture of refuge.

Birchville had crossed a line.

The parley had not brought peace, but it had held open a narrow ledge on which restraint and necessity might still have balanced for a time. Miller and his riders, in burning that cache and scattering what would have fed someone through cold weather, had kicked the camp off that ledge.

What came next would not be merely warning.

At length Roy said, "Can it be mended?"

Sam answered only after some silence.

"Not by talk alone."

By then the signal fires were gone, leaving only dark ridges and the cold shine of the moon above them. But every man in Birchville knew they had been seen, and every man worth the name understood that seeing them had changed the night.

Below, the camp held itself close behind sacks, walls, wagons, and the poor inventions of frightened industry.

Above, beneath the tall pines, the mountains kept their own stern account.

And in that account, the hard men had written something in flame that would not be easily unwritten by regret.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gold Dust and Ashes

After the burning of the cache, Birchville did not fall at once.

Towns, like men, often continue some while after the inward decision has gone against them. The store doors still opened in the morning. The Buckhorn still served its meals and its whiskey. Men still bent over pans in Bear Creek or went out in wary pairs to the nearer cuts and washes where gold had once been thought reason enough for any hazard. The cannon still stood in Main Street. The walls still held, the watches still walked, and lamps still showed at evening through cracks and windows as though ordinary life were only waiting for a fairer wind.

Yet all the same, the dream had begun to collapse—not with drama at first, but by subtraction.

Trade thinned.

This was the clearest sign, and to Sam the least deniable. Where once by noon his counter would have borne a proper confusion of pokes, scales, sacks, requests, impatient men, and the cheerful lying that attends every fresh strike, there were now longer empty intervals between customers. Fewer miners came in with dust enough to make them careless. Those who did had less of it. More often a man laid down not a healthy poke of fresh gold, but a few pinched grains in paper, or a bit of silver coin saved from better days, or else he came only to ask the price of flour and leave without buying after hearing it.

Sam watched this with the same exactness he had given the matter from the first.

"These are not mining-camp purchases," he said one afternoon, standing over the ledger.

Roy, setting bottles back on the shelf in the spirit of a man trying to make order appear by arrangement alone, glanced over.

"What are they, then?"

"Retrenchment."

Roy made a face. "That is a poor word for trade."

"It is an accurate one."

A Cornish miner had that morning bought only coffee and lamp oil, though he had once spent dust as if Providence ran a vein directly beneath his boots. Another man came in for tobacco and left without it because the price offended him more than abstinence. Two diggers from the lower wash split one sack of flour between them and quarreled in the doorway over which half was heavier. Even the more prosperous buyers had altered. They purchased not for chance, but against want.

The saloon side changed likewise, though in a different fashion.

Men still drank, but much of the old lavishness had gone out of it. There had once been in Birchville a kind of wastefulness proper to new camps, when every fresh color in a pan encouraged a fellow to believe tomorrow would pay for today's bottle and next week's game. Now men drank with calculation or desperation, and neither makes for cheerful company. The room grew louder at times, but the loudness sat atop anxiety rather than above it. A man laughed too hard, swore too readily, slapped the counter too quickly, or argued over poor cards with more heat than the loss deserved. The room had not grown poorer in noise, only in spirit.

Worse followed when the south freight failed to arrive.

Delaney's wagon had been expected by noon on a Tuesday. By dusk it had not come. By midnight no bell had been heard from the road below the rise. At sunrise the next morning the line of men watching south had lengthened and stiffened into something no one yet named aloud.

Freight, in such a place, was not convenience. It was continuation. A camp could lose a miner, a claim, even a merchant, and yet continue for a while if the road still carried meal, coffee, powder, lamp oil, bacon, cloth, and rumor upward from the valley. But when a wagon failed to come, every other uncertainty in town sharpened at once.

By breakfast the Buckhorn had already cut portions smaller without admitting it. By noon three women had begun quietly putting by what little meal they had in separate sacks. At the Beans' place men bought tobacco while asking indirect questions about flour stocks. A freighter's hand from below swore the road was still open, then admitted he had heard signal fires two ridges south the night before. No one knew whether Delaney had turned back, been delayed, been warned off, or been taken. Ignorance multiplied fear more efficiently than any fact.

Roy came in from the porch where he had been looking south for the tenth time in an hour.

"They're talking as if famine were two days off."

"Scarcity requires less imagination than famine," Sam answered. "So it seems nearer."

Roy poured himself coffee and drank it too quickly.

"If Delaney doesn't come, they'll strip these shelves."

"If Delaney doesn't come, they'll stop pretending shelves are permanent."

That day, for the first time, Sam moved certain sacks from the front room to the rear, not to hide them altogether, but to place them under firmer account. Roy noticed at once.

"You don't trust them now?"

"I trust fear to make poor arithmetic of men."

That same afternoon Roy committed the error Sam had most expected and least wished.

The saloon side had filled early, and with it came the particular mood which descends upon anxious camps when money is scarce, roads uncertain, and men decide to drink against both facts before either worsens. Roy, feeling the strain of thinning custom and wanting still to keep the room lively, began extending credit too freely.

It started small. A drink here for a miner who promised dust on the morrow. A bottle there against a rifle until Friday. Cards allowed to continue on the strength of a mule interest not yet realized. Roy called it keeping the room warm. Sam, hearing the shape of it from behind the counter, called it by another name.

By evening he had had enough.

The immediate cause was a broad fellow from Texas who had already lost at cards, spent what coin he had, and then obtained another bottle from Roy on the assurance that a partner in the north cut owed him for a claim and would settle "sure as judgment." When the man staggered out leaving only promises behind, Sam came round from the store side and took the bottle book from Roy's hand.

"What are you doing?"

Roy bristled. "Serving custom."

"No. Manufacturing debt."

Roy reached for the book. Sam did not yield it.

"A room dies if a man cannot bend a little."

"A room dies faster when it's full of men drinking against money they do not possess."

"It keeps them here."

"It keeps them insolvent."

Two or three men at the nearest table grew very interested in their glasses. In camps, quarrels between partners are always watched, and between brothers watched closer.

Roy lowered his voice.

"You talk as if every favor were theft."

"I talk," Sam replied just as low, "as if flour, whiskey, powder, and lamp oil cannot be paid for with your taste for keeping the room amused."

Roy's face flushed.

"You think I don't know what's happening here?"

"I think you know and still reach for the old tricks because they once served you."

That struck. Roy stepped back half a pace, his mouth tightening. He said nothing further, which was wise. In another moment they might have finished the matter before the whole room. Instead he took up a rag and went to wiping the bar with such attention that any fool could see he was near enough anger to throw the bottle through the mirror.

Later, when the rougher company had gone and the room had fallen into sour quiet, Sam laid the book between them.

"No more credit without my seeing it first."

Roy looked at the book but not at Sam.

"You'd turn a saloon into a counting house."

"No," said Sam. "The counting house is the only thing keeping the saloon from turning into a charity."

Roy laughed once without joy.

"There speaks the elder brother in his truest office."

"There speaks the man who means to leave this place with enough left to do so."

That ended the quarrel because it named the true ground beneath it.

Meanwhile the card tables grew uglier.

There had come into Birchville some weeks earlier a gambler called Veale, neat of hand and smooth of speech, with the talent common to his tribe for making a desperate man feel almost respectable while being skinned. In richer days he had done well enough at the Buckhorn and now and then at the Beans' place. In lean days, however, a gambler either starves or prospers beyond decency. Veale chose the latter.

As the camp tightened and men drank against fear, Veale won heavily.

He won from miners who should have kept their dust for meal. He won from a freight hand who lost first his wages and then his saddle. He won from a man whose partner had left town, leaving him with equal portions of bad luck and resentment. He won in the Buckhorn, in back rooms, and one notable night in the Beans' place from Briscoe himself, who lost a month's worth of labor, a revolver with ivory grips, and what remained of his temper.

"You cheat," Briscoe said at last, standing so fast his chair went over.

Veale did not move except to gather the last of the cards into one neat pile.

"No," he said. "I profit by distress. It is a different profession."

Briscoe's hand went for his revolver.

Roy was quicker.

He came over the table in one clean motion, struck Briscoe's arm clear as it came up, seized the revolver before it fully cleared leather, and had the barrel turned harmlessly aside almost in the same breath. The shot went into the ceiling, showering plaster and curses.

Then stillness.

Roy stood with the revolver in one hand, his face gone flat.

"No murder in here," he said.

Briscoe, breathing hard, answered, "He robbed me."

Roy looked once at the dust and gear before Veale.

"No. He merely did it by invitation."

The room laughed uneasily, but the resentment remained. Veale left soon afterward with his winnings and no one offered him friendship in the street.

Then came the death in the hills.

It was not an Apache attack exactly, nor could anyone say with certainty what hand finally killed the man. That was the worst of it. In healthier times danger has shape: a raid, a cave-in, a quarrel, a bad crossing. But when a district turns uncertain entire, men begin dying in ways that belong not to one cause but to all of them together.

The man was named Pritchard, a solitary digger from Ohio who had kept mostly to a shallow cut north of the better-known wash. He had gone out one gray morning under the assumption that one more day's work might yet recover the promise the district had been making him for two months. By nightfall he had not returned. The next day Haskins and two others found his mule wandering below a cedar break with one pack strap torn loose and blood on the cinch. They found Pritchard farther up under a broken shelf of rock where the ground fell hard into a ravine.

Whether he had been shot first and fallen, or startled and fallen and then been set upon later, or simply climbed in poor light and met the mountain's indifference without help, no one could say. His body showed bruising, one broken leg, a head wound, and the marks of a night spent in cold enough to take the life from any man not found in time. His rifle was gone. His poke was gone too, though whether taken by the living or lost in the tumble no one proved.

Birchville received him back in silence.

It was not only the death itself, though that was sad enough. It was what it implied: that now the whole district had turned treacherous. A man need not ride in a party or blunder into a marked wash. It was enough merely to go out alone too far, stay too late, or trust one's own luck overmuch. The hills had become a place where fortune, fear, accident, and enmity all wore near the same face.

That evening, with Pritchard laid out and Delaney's freight still absent, Sam made his inventory.

He did it not dramatically, but in the plain hard manner of one reducing confusion to quantities before it grows too large for any pen to master. He counted flour, beans, bacon, coffee, tobacco, powder, shot, lamp oil, salt, rope, canvas, boots, spare tack, candles, and whiskey. He counted what was owed to them, what they owed below, what could be sold quickly, what might fetch little, what

could be packed, what must be abandoned. He counted the number of regular customers now gone, the number nearly so, and the number spending not from gain but from what remained of older means.

At length he sat back and closed the book.

Roy, unusually quiet after the matter of the credit and the card-table shot, said from the doorway, "Well?"

Sam looked up.

"Too much risk," he said. "Too little certainty. No stable road. No stable trade. No stable margin between staying and being trapped."

Roy came slowly into the room.

"You sound as if sentence has been passed."

"It has. Only the camp has not heard it all at once."

Roy stood by the billiard table and laid a hand on the rail.

"This place could still turn."

"No."

"That is quick."

"It is exact."

Roy's jaw tightened.

"You are too ready to decide a thing dead while it still breathes."

"And you," Sam replied, "are too ready to mistake movement for life."

Roy turned away from the table and walked to the bottles catching the low lamp.

"There's still gold in the creek."

"There are still men in the creek," Sam said. "That is not the same thing."

"The road may yet open."

"Yes. And may shut worse."

"A camp has weathered worse turns."

"Not this camp. Not with its position. Not with its quarrels. Not with winter nearer than comfort and freight less certain than prayer."

Roy laughed once and shook his head.

"I know you're right in half of it."

"That is enough."

"No," Roy said. "It is the wrong half. A thing can be near ruin and still save itself."

Sam gave him a long look.

"You still want to believe that because if Birchville can turn, then so can every other poor bet you have ever laid in your life."

That struck clean enough that Roy did not answer.

Outside, as if to close the day properly, the weather changed.

It began with wind. Not a steady useful wind such as clears smoke or carries scent, but a restless mountain wind that came first in fits down the draws, touching one roof and leaving the next, then gathering itself along the slope until the pines began to sound above the camp with that deep uneasy rushing which is neither voice nor silence but something between. Loose boards knocked. A shutter

banged twice before someone secured it. The Buckhorn sign strained on its chain. From the horse lines came the nervous shifting and stamping of animals who read weather and trouble in one script.

Then clouds came over from the west and covered what stars had been showing.

Roy stepped out onto the porch and looked toward the dark ridges. Sam joined him after a while.

The whole camp seemed to draw in under that rising wind. Lamps glowed warmer for the darkness around them. Doorways narrowed. Sound carried oddly and then was swallowed. Somewhere from the Buckhorn came the end of a fiddle tune cut short before its natural close. The pines above answered with a long shuddering note of their own.

"Fortune," Roy said after some time, "ought at least to depart with better manners."

Sam folded his arms against the cold.

"Fortune has no manners. Only men imagine it does while it favors them."

Roy watched the black line of timber bend and recover.

"You truly think it has turned?"

"Yes."

Roy drew a breath and let it out slowly.

"I am not ready to agree."

"No," Sam said. "But you are closer."

They stood a while longer under the porch roof while the wind moved through Birchville like a warning too old to require words.

Beyond the cabins, beyond the walls and sacks and poor inventions of anxious men, the tall pines labored in the dark. Their sound rolled over the camp in long uneasy surges, as if the mountain itself were turning in its sleep and the little settlement beneath had become no more to it than grit beneath a saddle blanket.

At last a few cold drops struck the dust and left dark marks that vanished almost as soon as they appeared.

Gold dust and ashes, Sam thought. That was what the place had come to.

Inside the store the ledgers waited. The bottles shone. The billiard table stood level and ready, as if none of the world beyond had altered. But the wind in the pines said otherwise, and in Birchville more men than would admit it had begun to hear the same thing: that the promise which had drawn them beneath the tall timber was no longer leading forward, but inward toward reckoning.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Last Strong Drink

There are men who meet the waning of fortune by growing sober, and there are men who, seeing the table turn against them, call for another bottle and a louder tune as if noise itself might shame the cards into changing.

Roy Bean belonged, by nature, to the latter sort.

It was not that he failed to understand what had been happening in Birchville. He understood more than Sam sometimes credited him with, and more than he liked admitting aloud. He had seen the shelves thinning in one way and remaining full in another. He had heard the change in the room when a miner asked the price of flour before he asked the price of whiskey. He had watched the road go uncertain, the practical men turn hard with caution, the frightened men hard with pride, and the camp's little dreams of elegance grow defensive in the shadow of the hills. He knew all that.

But Roy's spirit had been formed in resistance to collapse of a particular kind. Some men can submit early to necessity and thereby preserve strength for the road beyond. Roy, being made of brighter and more volatile material, had first to spend himself against the fact before he could yield to it. He did not bow to a failing place if there remained any chance of turning the room, the mood, or the tale by force of charm, noise, and stubborn display.

So, on the evening after the wind had moved through the pines and the road still failed to yield Delaney's wagon, Roy determined upon one last strong effort to make the Beans' place feel like a saloon and not a counting room waiting to become a packing room.

He polished the bottles until the glass flashed warmly in the lamplight. He had the billiard table brushed twice. He shifted the lamps to better advantage so the green cloth shone and the mirrors behind the bar multiplied the room more generously than truth required. He sent word through half the camp that there would be music, cards, and proper play till late. He even persuaded the Buckhorn fiddler—who preferred his own room and his own tips—to come over for part of the night on the strength of two bottles and a supper plate.

Sam watched the preparations from the store side with the expression of a man observing his brother build a bright awning against a coming hailstorm.

"You mean to entertain the siege?" he asked.

Roy, arranging clean glasses in a row that pleased his eye if not Sam's sense of economy, said, "I mean to remind the camp it is not dead."

"It will not thank you for the reminder if you let half of it drink on promises again."

Roy gave him a look.

"I know what you think of my accounts."

"I think of them as a man thinks of leaks in the roof—differently in fair weather than before winter."

Roy smiled faintly.

"Well, tonight let us suppose the weather clear."

Sam did not answer, because the weather in Birchville had ceased to care what any man supposed.

By dusk the room had filled.

Men came because there was little else to do and because every camp in decline will seize upon any strong excuse to behave, for a few hours, like itself in better days. Miners came in with creek mud still on their boots. Freighters came smelling of mule and leather. Two merchants came only to observe and found themselves drinking by the second round. Haskins came and stood near the back wall where he could see the whole room without seeming to claim any part in it. Even Miller entered after a time, because a man who wishes to remain central to a town's passions cannot absent himself from its chief rooms.

There was billiards, card play, and the fiddler set to work with such vigor that the little room seemed for a brief while too small to hold its own noise. Men shouted over shots and laughed at nothing. Glasses rang on the counter. A young digger from below Santa Rita tried to dance with a camp woman between the billiard table and the tobacco shelf and nearly overturned both. Someone called for a song. Someone else swore the last man had murdered it and attempted it himself with greater confidence and less tune. The whole place took on that bright, strained energy by which men try to prove they are masters of an hour already slipping from them.

Roy moved through it all like a man partly in his native country and partly in a fever dream of it. He laughed, dealt, poured, set up games, corrected a cue hold, broke up one small quarrel before it earned the name, and kept the room turning with that quick, alert charm which made him, when he chose to use it well, one of the best saloon men a rough country could ask.

Yet there was something different in him too. His eye moved more often to the men themselves than it once had. He was reading not merely appetite now, but exhaustion, injury, fear, and the dangerous points at which wounded pride might suddenly seek another body to strike.

Sam saw this and said nothing. He remained chiefly on the store side at first, though no wall in that building was thick enough to separate sober trade from theatrical ruin when both occupied the same floor.

As the night deepened, the mood sharpened.

It is the way of desperate merriment that it must either fall gently into weariness or else tip over into anger once the surface spirit has spent itself. In Birchville that night it chose the latter course. Men who had come determined to laugh like victors had, by the third drink, remembered their debts, the missing freight, the uncertain roads, the walls, the graves, the silence in the hills, the cards they had lost, and the simple intolerable fact that they were still where they had been yesterday, only poorer.

The first signs were small. A billiard shot disputed too hotly. A joke taken for insult. A hand to a shoulder kept there one moment too long. Then Veale the gambler appeared, drawn by rumor of a full room and easy folly, and the atmosphere worsened at once, for he represented in one tidy person every mean defeat a camp preferred to hate in another man rather than acknowledge in itself.

He took a table near the rear wall and within an hour had drawn a ring of players round him—Briscoe among them, Mercer, and a narrow-chested miner named Lunn who had no business at cards when sober and less when strained.

Roy saw the danger immediately, but the room was too full, too charged, and too dependent on motion to bear clumsy interference. He contented himself at first with watching closely.

The billiard game at the center of the room grew louder. Miller stood nearby with a glass in hand and spoke with that hard elevated cheer by which frightened men try to keep their own courage from

cooling. Roy, seeing him gather listeners, deliberately called for another tune from the fiddler and set two fresh men to the table, preferring the room's noise general rather than concentrated around any single grievance.

For a little while it seemed enough.

Then Briscoe lost heavily.

No one in the room could afterward say whether Veale cheated, or merely did what gamblers do best in rooms where too many men are drinking under strain. Briscoe believed himself wronged; Veale believed himself fortunate; and the cards testified for neither side. What mattered was not the exact mechanics, but the temper already waiting beneath the play.

Briscoe threw down his hand.

"Again," he said.

Veale gathered the stakes with neat fingers.

"No."

Briscoe leaned across the table. "No?"

"You have lost enough for one hour."

That should have been mercy. In such a room it sounded like insult.

The crowd around them opened by instinct. Men did not flee. They merely made angles of sight.

Briscoe's face had gone red beneath the beard.

"You'll take my stake but not my chance to recover it?"

Veale remained seated, which was either courage or a gambler's substitute for it.

Across the room Roy saw the line of danger come together at once—the flushed face, the dropped hand, the table edge, the set of shoulders around the game. He was moving before Sam had fully lifted his head from the counter.

"Briscoe," Roy said sharply, "leave it."

Briscoe did not turn. "This ain't yours."

"No," Roy answered, coming nearer. "But the room is."

That reached him partly. Briscoe glanced round enough to show one eye.

"He's skinned me."

Roy looked once at Veale, who returned the look with that infuriating smoothness which had won him more enemies than any man can afford in a failing camp.

"Then be poorer in the morning and alive in the evening," Roy said. "Many in Birchville would count it a bargain."

It might have ended there had Miller not chosen that moment to speak from near the billiard table, his voice pitched to carry.

"A man ought not be robbed in a room run by friends too timid to call the cheat."

All talk ceased.

Sam came out from behind the counter then.

"What is this?"

Miller lifted his glass slightly.

"Only wondering whether justice still has a table in Birchville."

Roy's face changed.

Now it must be understood that the younger Bean in earlier days might have taken such bait in the very coin it was offered—flourish for flourish, insult for insult, and a fight made half for principle and half for the pleasure of being watched. But the mountains, the parley, the thinning camp, and the second ledger had all been at work on him whether he liked it or not. He still felt the old impulse clearly enough: to blaze up, to command the room, to answer Miller in front of every eye with something physical and final. Only now another instinct crossed it—the understanding that in a camp like Birchville every act of vanity costs not just the actor but the whole brittle structure of men and trust around him.

So Roy did not turn on Miller first. He stepped between Briscoe and the table, laid one hand flat on the felt, and the other lightly on Briscoe's gun wrist.

"No murder in here," he said.

Briscoe jerked.

"Take your hand off me."

Roy's voice remained quiet.

"I will when you take your hand out of your own grave."

That carried farther than noise might have done. Men heard in it not play, but decision.

Miller began again from the side. "If the man's cheated—"

Roy cut him off without looking round.

"And if he has, he'll answer it outside with witnesses and daylight. But no man dies in this room because the whole camp is too near the edge already."

The fiddler lowered his bow. Veale sat motionless and pale. Briscoe breathed hard enough to shake his shoulders.

Then Sam spoke.

"Briscoe. Step back."

It was Sam's tone, as much as Roy's hand, that ended the thing. The digger swore, but he stepped back. Roy removed his hand only when the motion was complete. Veale began gathering the cards.

"No," said Sam. "You leave them."

The gambler froze.

Sam came to the table and looked at both men.

"This room has cost enough lately without blood on the floor. Veale, cash out and go. Briscoe, you'll not touch a card or bottle again tonight in this place. Miller, if you want justice, do not stir murder and call it principle."

Miller's mouth tightened, but before he could answer Roy turned on him at last.

"You heard him."

The room waited.

There was in Roy's face then something the town had not often seen from him without drink or anger to light it—a steadiness that was neither theatrical nor borrowed from another man's authority. Miller saw it too and, whatever he later told himself, chose not to test it in that hour.

The crisis passed.

Not entirely, not cleanly, but enough. Veale left under a dozen hostile eyes and was fortunate no one followed him. Briscoe was led out by Mercer and a freighter who preferred his own skull unbroken

by the consequence of other men's temper. The fiddler, after a long uncertain pause, took up a softer tune which no one truly heard. One by one the room resumed motion, though something had gone out of it.

The last big night of noise had broken on its own edge.

By midnight only the sour-end company remained: men too deep in whiskey to admit the evening spoiled, men too lonely to go, and one or two who stayed from habit after all reason for staying had departed. Roy served them with less talk. The lamps burned lower. The billiard balls were put away. Sam closed the store side altogether and waited in silence for the room to empty.

When at last it did, Roy barred the door himself and stood with both hands on the wood, forehead bent.

"Well," he said, without turning, "there was your entertainment."

Sam began gathering glasses.

"It might have been worse."

Roy laughed once, though not because he found anything amusing.

"That is the great frontier hymn, is it not? It might have been worse."

"It is often accurate."

Roy turned at last and leaned back against the door.

"I nearly gave Miller what he wanted."

"Yes."

"I nearly gave Briscoe his excuse."

"Yes."

"And I nearly gave myself the pleasure of both."

Sam set down the last glass.

"But you did not."

The room was very quiet now. Without customers, without music, without the constant defense of motion, the place looked suddenly smaller than Roy had ever liked to see it—more room than stage, more business than proving ground, more temporary arrangement of wood, felt, bottle, and light than the beginning of any lasting destiny.

He came slowly to the rear table where Sam had already reopened the ledger, as if no night in Birchville could end without figures waiting to outlast it.

"Do you know what I hate most?" Roy asked.

"Tonight?"

"In general, if your imagination will bear the strain."

Sam folded his hands.

"Well?"

Roy sat opposite him.

"I do not want to leave this place as a man leaves a bad bet. I do not want to ride down-country with every road man saying the Beans talked big, sold whiskey, played at holding, and then cleared out when the weather and the hills turned rough."

There it was at last. Not merely fear of loss, nor greed, nor even love of the room. It was pride, but a deeper and more vulnerable kind than Miller's. Roy did not want the story of his own part in Birchville told in a way that made him small.

Sam studied him a moment before answering.

"You think leaving means failure."

Roy stared at the lamp.

"Does it not?"

"No."

Roy looked up sharply.

Sam went on.

"A doomed camp is not redeemed by men who remain one week too long out of vanity. There is no honor in misunderstanding the cost of staying. Only damage."

Roy sat still.

"You sound certain it is doomed."

"I sound certain of what I can count. The road is uncertain. Freight is uncertain. Trade is thinning. The district is wider danger now than when we came. The camp is divided. The hills have not relented, and after Miller's ride have less reason than before to do so. Men are leaving. More will. That is not doom in the theatrical sense you prefer. It is worse. It is arithmetic."

Roy smiled faintly despite himself.

"You would turn judgment day into bookkeeping."

"And you," Sam said, "would rather turn bookkeeping into legend."

Roy looked away.

For a long while neither spoke. The lamp hissed softly. Outside, in the lull after wind, a horse shifted at the line and tack rang once.

At length Roy said, "When I was younger, I always thought a man could outface a place. Smile at it. Bluff it. Ride harder, drink later, talk larger, and keep whatever ground he chose by force of spirit."

"And now?"

Roy drummed his fingers once and stopped.

"Now I think some ground does not care what sort of man you suppose yourself to be."

That answer pleased Sam more than he showed.

"Good," he said simply.

Roy snorted.

"Do not sound too fatherly. It ill becomes you."

"It becomes me well enough when the student is late to the lesson."

That brought the ghost of a real smile.

Roy leaned back and let his eyes travel once more over the room—the shelves, the counter, the green cloth in the dim, the cue rack, the bottles. He saw it now not as failure, exactly, but as something that had been true for a time and false to expect forever.

"I still hate the thought of going," he said.

"Yes."

"I still hate the talk that will follow."

"Yes."

"I still think a man might turn things if he were clever enough."

Sam shook his head.

"There it is."

Roy looked at him.

"What?"

"The last refuge of your kind. If not by luck, then by charm. If not by charm, then by cleverness. If not by cleverness, then by nerve. Always one more quality to save you from admitting the thing itself."

"And the thing itself?"

"That departure may now be the only honest course."

Roy said nothing after that.

He let the words remain between them a while, as men let bitter medicine rest on the tongue before swallowing because postponement is the last small act of resistance available. At last he gave a slow nod.

"Honest," he said. "That is a cold word."

"It is often cold before it is useful."

Roy rose and crossed to the billiard table. He laid his hand on the rail not like a proprietor admiring a handsome article, but like a man taking measure of something he may soon have to surrender.

"When the time comes," he said without turning, "I want to leave straight. No sneaking out before dawn. No muttering that we're merely shifting stock. No saving face with lies."

Sam watched him.

"No?"

"No." Roy's voice was quiet. "If we go, we go knowing why."

"That," said Sam, "would be a beginning."

Roy turned back then, and for perhaps the first time in all Birchville's rough season there was less performance than plainness in his face.

"I am not yet ready tonight," he said.

"I know."

"But I am nearer."

"Yes."

The lamp burned lower. Sam closed the ledger at last. Roy took up the glasses and began carrying them without being asked, which in that room and from that man said more than a long promise might have done.

Outside, the camp slept uneasily beneath the tall pines. The Beans' place stood quiet after its last great effort at noise and denial, and the silence that followed it seemed not defeat exactly, but disclosure.

The room had spoken its last strong drink.

What remained now was not bravado, but choice.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Scalps More Valuable Than Gold

By then the camp had ceased to lose people by accident.

What had once been scattered departures—one family here, two miners there, a merchant slipping out under shadow and self-justification—had become something more regular and therefore more dangerous to Birchville's confidence. A place may endure a little thinning and call it fortune sorting the stout from the weak. But when departure grows habitual, when each morning makes a man look first not toward the creek or the diggings but toward which cabin stands dark and which hitching post lies empty, then the town begins to understand, whether it says so or not, that something stronger than one night's fear is at work. Men are making conclusions.

The next family to leave did so in plainer fashion than the first.

They were Mexicans from near Santa Rita, the father a miner of quiet industry, the mother a woman who had washed and baked for half the central line of cabins and was better liked than most of the men who paid her poorly. They had stayed longer than many, partly because they had no easy place else to go, and partly because the husband, like so many others, had once believed one good week in Bear Creek might set all hardship right. But good weeks had grown scarce, roads uncertain, and the sound in the hills after Miller's raid had changed from warning to something harder.

They loaded in daylight.

No one could mistake it. The wagon stood before their cabin by midmorning. Blankets were rolled, cooking pots packed, tools tied down, a cradle wedged among sacks of meal and two chairs. The woman moved about the business with the economy of motion peculiar to those who have already argued the matter with themselves and see no use in reopening it for the benefit of onlookers. The man said little. His face was not ashamed, only tired.

Half the street watched without quite admitting to it.

Roy, standing on the porch of the store with a cup of coffee he had forgotten to drink, said, "They don't even mean to pretend."

"No," said Sam. "That stage is passed."

A boy from the next cabin ran to help lift a chest into the wagon. The mother thanked him. A woman from farther down pressed two wrapped biscuits into the smallest child's hand. The father settled the traces, climbed to the seat, and only then did one of the town's harder voices break the silence.

"Running, are you?" Briscoe called from near the horse line.

The miner turned his head once.

"No. Leaving."

Then he drove on.

It was such a small distinction, and yet it struck the whole street more sharply than if he had cursed them. Running was cowardice and could be despised. Leaving implied judgment.

By noon they were gone down the southern road, and Birchville felt their absence in that peculiar way camps do—less in the number removed than in the meaning carried off with them. The cabin stood shut, the brush arbor by the door gone gray in the sun, and one could almost see in the empty

place the shape of all those practical reckonings by which women often arrive before men at truths the men later claim to have discovered themselves.

That evening another merchant began packing wagons.

This time there was less audience to it because the fellow had chosen his hour better. He worked by lantern in the rear of his store, moving with the caution of a thief and the clumsiness of a man not practiced in secrecy. He had already sold down much of his stock in the preceding days and now meant to save what remained before the camp, the road, the hills, or his own nerve rendered the choice impossible.

Roy saw him first.

He had stepped outside merely to cool himself after an argument over credit and was leaning on the porch rail when he caught the low creak of wheels and the shuttered lantern glow behind the man's place.

"There goes another patriot," he said.

Sam joined him after a moment and looked without comment.

The merchant wrestled a barrel into place, nearly dropped it, swore under his breath, then turned as if he had sensed eyes on him. Even across the dark street Roy recognized the expression. It was not exactly guilt. It was the look of a man who has discovered too late that necessity allows little room for previous speeches.

"He'll be off before dawn," Roy said.

"Yes."

"He was loud enough last week on holding."

"Yes."

Roy was silent a while, then said, "This camp breeds hypocrites faster than gold."

"No," said Sam. "It only strips the paint from them quicker."

The next day the phrase was spoken.

It happened near noon in the Beans' place, and by one of the older miners who had never been greatly given either to speech or ornament. His name was Kearney. He had a gray beard, a scar under one eye from older work in Sonora, and the patient worn look of a man who had spent enough years in camps to know the difference between hardship that may yet pay and hardship that has already begun asking more than any strike can return.

He came in for tobacco, stood at the counter while Sam weighed it, and listened without pleasure to two younger men disputing whether the camp ought to answer its losses with another strong ride north. One said the hills must be taught respect. The other said the road would soon fill again once men below heard Birchville had shown spirit.

Kearney spat into the sawdust bucket and said in the driest voice in the room:

"A man's scalp is more valuable than gold in these hills."

The room went still.

It was not poetry that caught them, though there was rough strength in the line. It was the hard plain fit of it to everything men had been trying not to say. Gold had brought them up. Gold had excused the first danger, the first dead man, the first walls, the first shrunk line of movement, the first failed freight, the first wrong answered by another wrong. But there comes a point in every honest

reckoning when the sums no longer lie between a man and his hoped-for fortune, but between his skin and what he might still carry away before losing it.

Roy, who had been drying a glass, set it down slowly.

Kearney took his tobacco, laid down the coin, and added, "That's all I have to say on Birchville."

Then he went out.

No one answered him in the room. Yet by dusk half the camp had heard the phrase, and by suppertime the other half had repeated it, improved it, resented it, or inwardly accepted it.

At the Buckhorn that evening one freighter said he was damned if he would let an old miner teach him courage with proverbs. Yet later, in the same room, the proprietor was heard muttering the line over his accounts. Near the creek a woman used it while folding shirts. A teamster repeated it at the horse line and crossed himself afterward as if the truth embarrassed him. By the next morning boys were saying it in the street without understanding it, which is when a phrase has truly taken hold in a place.

Even Miller heard it and mocked it.

"Scalp talk is for men already half gone."

But the mockery rang hollow. Birchville could count as well as hear. Empty cabins, more barter, fewer buyers, less confidence, and a road that seemed every day longer in both directions—these things were beginning to weigh against even the loudest man's pride.

For Sam Bean the phrase did not create a conclusion. It named one already made.

He had been carrying it inwardly for days, perhaps longer. The second ledger. The failed freight. The thin trade. The shrinking margin between profit and risk. The burned cache. The signal fires. The altered silence in the hills. The way practical men now asked road questions before they asked mining questions. All of it had been reducing itself in him toward a single clear understanding. Kearney's sentence merely gave public words to the private sum.

That afternoon Sam went into the rear room alone, opened both ledgers, and sat a long while with them. He checked figures already checked, inventories already known, debts not worth collecting, credits still owing below, flour, coffee, tobacco, powder, lead, rope, canvas, boots, lamp oil, and what could be broken down or loaded quickly if speed were all that lay between orderly departure and something less chosen.

When Roy came in from the front room some time later, he found both books open and Sam looking not at the page but at the far wall.

"Well?" Roy asked, though he knew well enough what kind of quiet this was.

Sam closed the second ledger.

"We go."

The words hung between them without echo.

Roy had expected them, feared them, argued against them in silence before they were said, and yet when they came so plain he felt something in him stiffen as if against cold.

"So that is it."

"Yes."

"You mean soon."

"Yes."

Roy looked down at the ledger, then toward the front room where the shelves still stood, the counter, the green cloth, the familiar arrangement of bottles and light and wood he had spent so much of himself trying to keep bright.

"Leaving now," he said slowly, "will look like surrender."

Sam answered at once.

"The camp is already surrendering."

Roy's eyes flashed. "Not us."

"Yes. Us too. Only without honesty if we stay and pretend otherwise."

Roy took a turn across the room, then another. He had resisted many truths in his life, but few had tasted as hard as this one because it struck not only at his plans but at the picture he wished to keep of himself. To go now, while the camp yet stood, while the cannon still sat in Main Street, while games could still be had of evening and men still came in by habit if not by hope—that seemed to him too near the appearance of quitting.

He stopped by the billiard table and laid both hands on the rail.

"You always speak as if appearances are nothing."

"They are often less than nothing when paid for dearly."

"If we leave now, every road man south of here will say the Beans broke."

"Let them."

"Every fool in camp will say we lost our nerve."

"Let them."

"Every loudmouth in the Buckhorn will call it proof Birchville can't be held."

Sam stood then.

"Birchville cannot be held as men first imagined. That proof is already around us in empty cabins, shrinking trade, uncertain roads, fresh graves, and men leaving by daylight who once would have skulked out in the dark. The town is surrendering piece by piece, Roy. Families, merchants, miners, freight, certainty, even language—it gives all of it up, only it lacks the honesty to name the act."

Roy stared at him.

That speech, more than the bare decision, did the work. For in it Sam had touched the very sore point Roy had circled without admitting. The shame was not in leaving. The shame was in remaining solely to preserve appearances while the substance had already gone.

Roy laughed once, but softly, and not because he found anything amusing.

"There it is," he said. "You always know where to put the blade."

"I put it where the truth lies."

Roy turned away and looked through the open door into the front room, where the late light had begun to turn amber over the bottles and cast the billiard table into a kind of false gentleness.

The room did not look doomed. That was part of the cruelty. It looked like a room that might, with a proper evening and a little noise, become itself again. Birchville too, at certain hours, could still produce the appearance of continuation. Men were still in the creek. The Buckhorn still served supper. The fiddler still drew a tune. The cannon still sat before their door like a declaration. One could almost pretend.

But Roy had learned, though late, that pretense on frontier ground exacts its own payment.

He said at last, very quietly, "If we go, we go straight."

"Yes."

"No slipping off under false words."

"No."

"No saying we mean only to shift stock till spring."

"No."

Roy drew a breath and let it out.

"Then we go."

Sam gave a single nod. He had known his brother was nearer these last nights than he admitted. Still, hearing it mattered.

There was no ceremony after that. Good decisions in hard places seldom announce themselves with flourish. They descend instead into labor.

Before supper they began packing in earnest.

Sam took first to the goods most necessary and most saleable elsewhere: flour, coffee, tobacco, powder, lead, salt, rope, lamp oil, tools, tack, and cloth. He made piles and lists, marked what could be carried on wagon and pack, what must be sold quickly, what could be bartered, and what ought not be left if leaving could prevent it.

Roy took the room itself.

He removed the better bottles from display and packed them in straw and burlap. He sorted the cards, kept the newer decks, burned the bent ones. He set aside the glasses worth saving and left the chipped. He took down cues one by one and ran a hand along them before deciding which merited room on the wagon and which would fetch anything at all in town before they left. It was practical work, but to him it felt personal. Each object held some measure of his effort—of evenings roused, fights prevented, laughter won, rooms kept alive a little longer by his management. To pack them was to confess that the place had entered another stage of truth.

When he came to the billiard table, he stood a long while.

Sam, seeing this from the rear room, said only, "It will not go whole."

"I know."

Roy rested both hands on the rail.

"It was a handsome piece."

"Yes."

"For this place especially."

"Yes."

Roy smiled, but sadly now.

"It seems wrong that civilization should come apart with a wrench and a mule team."

Sam considered him.

"Civilization comes apart more often by illusion and pride. The wrench only finishes what other tools began."

Roy laughed despite himself and went for the tool chest.

By nightfall the rear room no longer looked like a storeroom alone. It looked like departure taking shape. Crates stood open. Goods were sorted. Saddles hung ready. Rope lay coiled. Figures were

marked in chalk. The front room remained outwardly much the same, because they had chosen not to alarm the town until their plans were nearer set, but even there the change had begun for any eye trained in subtraction.

After dark Roy crossed to the Buckhorn for a little while, not to drink much, but to feel the room one more time before the knowledge of his going entered it. He found the usual company reduced by one more absence. Kearney sat by the wall with his pipe. The proprietor was at his accounts. Miller spoke loudly near the bar about holding, always holding, though there was less conviction in it now that the phrase about scalps and gold had gone through the camp like a brushfire in dry grass.

Roy stayed only half an hour.

When he came back, Sam was still at the rear table with the ledger and a half-packed crate beside him.

"How did the room sound?" Sam asked.

"Like men trying not to hear themselves think."

"And you?"

Roy removed his hat and set it on the chair.

"I sounded like them, once."

Sam looked up.

"Yes."

Roy gave him a faint smile.

"Do not agree too readily. It injures brotherly affection."

Sam almost smiled.

After a time Roy said, "Kearney's phrase has done us a service."

"Yes."

Roy looked around the room where their leaving had already begun to occupy more space than their staying.

"A man's scalp is more valuable than gold in these hills," he said, tasting the words as if at last to make them his own. "There's no poetry in it."

"No."

"Only truth."

"Yes."

Roy leaned back, weary but clearer than he had been in many chapters.

"Then let us at least have the decency to act like men who've heard it."

Outside, Birchville held on beneath the tall pines, one more family gone, one more merchant nearly gone, one more day closer to the point at which endurance and denial could no longer be mistaken for the same thing.

Inside the Beans' place, amid crates, ledgers, goods, and silence, the brothers had crossed their own line at last.

Not yet onto the road.

But toward it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Closing of the Till

Once the decision to leave had been made plain between the brothers, the work of it took on that stern and undramatic character by which many of the most important acts in a man's life are accomplished. There was no trumpet to it, no speech nailed to a post, no public farewell spoken over whiskey and false cheer. Departure, like trade honestly managed, proved chiefly a matter of figures, straps, boards, hands, and hours.

Sam Bean began with the accounts.

He set both ledgers on the rear table, sharpened two pencils, and worked through the names one by one with the same unsentimental exactness that had governed him from the first day he looked down on Birchville from the rise above camp. Some men still owed enough to justify calling on them. Others owed sums that would never be recovered and did not merit the waste of breath pretending otherwise. Some accounts could be closed by barter, some by partial payment, and some only by a line drawn through them and the private admission that frontier arithmetic is never fully clean.

Roy, coming in from the front room with a bundle of cue sticks under one arm, watched his brother strike through one name and then another.

"That fellow owes half a month."

"He is gone."

"And this one?"

"He will be gone before dark."

Roy laid the cues against the wall and leaned over the book.

"You write off a man quick."

"I write off what the road has already taken."

One by one Sam sent for those who still remained and whose debts had enough flesh on them to be worth collecting before the town thinned further. Some came readily enough because they had known the summons would come. Some came sullenly because no man likes to be asked for settlement at the very moment when the camp itself appears to be settling downward into uncertainty. Some paid in dust, some in coin, some in tools, ammunition, or tack. One man offered a lame mule and was told no. Another offered a half-interest in a claim above the north cut and was told that paper rights to future luck were of no use to men about to ride south.

"You leave hard," said the Buckhorn proprietor when he came in to settle what he owed on coffee and tobacco.

"No," Sam answered. "I leave exact."

The Buckhorn man grunted and counted out coin and dust together, unwilling to admit that he admired the discipline even while resenting it.

Others proved easier to close.

A widow who had taken flour on credit for three weeks came in with apology in her face and a parcel of mended shirts over one arm.

"I cannot pay the whole," she said.

Sam looked at the shirts, then at her.

"You owe less than half a sack's worth."

She began to protest, but he pushed the ledger aside.

"It is closed."

Roy, hearing this from the bar, said later when she had gone, "There are hours when you are almost human."

"There are hours," Sam said, "when it is cheaper not to be a brute."

Not every account was so easily ended. Briscoe came in flushed and stubborn, laid down a revolver, two bits, and a pouch of poor dust, and declared himself square on a debt that was not half covered by the lot. Sam pushed the revolver back.

"You still need that more than I do."

Briscoe stared. "Then mark the balance."

"No. Mark it against your vanity and be done."

The man did not know whether he had been insulted or absolved, which is sometimes the same feeling in rough camps. He took the revolver, left the dust and coin, and went out muttering.

Meanwhile the front room gave itself over to dismantling.

Roy took charge of that as naturally as Sam took charge of the books, though in Roy's hands even dismantling retained a trace of style. He sold what could be sold quickly and to advantage, but where advantage failed he preferred a fitting exit to a profitable one. Bottles were boxed. Mirrors taken down. The better lamps packed in straw. Chipped glasses set out cheap. Extra chairs were sold to the Buckhorn for less than they were worth and more than they would fetch in honest auction. The cue rack came down. Three cues he kept. Two he sold. One he snapped across his knee because it had warped badly and because, he said, "No man ought to begin the next chapter of his life with crooked timber if he can help it."

The billiard table was another matter.

It had stood for Roy from the beginning as more than furniture. It was statement, promise, performance, civilization in green cloth and polished wood. When they had hauled it into Birchville, it had seemed proof that the camp might grow not merely profitable but stylish—that a man might rise above dust and fear by arranging a room properly and giving rough company a polished object around which to conduct their appetites.

Now it had to be reckoned with.

It could not go whole. The road would not bear such vanity, nor the wagon permit it. To abandon it entire in the room seemed to Roy at first a kind of desecration, like leaving behind not only wood and felt but all the labor by which he had once tried to make the place seem more than it was. Yet sentiment could not conjure axle strength.

For two days he put off the matter, working round it, removing balls, cues, racks, and lamps, as if the table might somehow decide itself.

At last Haskins, who had come in for powder and found Roy standing by it as a widower might stand by a coffin before the lid is set, said dryly:

"You mean to marry it or move it?"

Roy looked up. "Neither, if the world would kindly alter."

Haskins spat into the sawdust.

"It won't."

"No," Roy said. "That is the one defect in creation I have not yet overcome."

In the end he sold the slate and the better fittings to the Buckhorn proprietor, who bought them reluctantly because he knew the pieces might prove useful somewhere, someday, to some larger ambition. The legs and frame were taken apart. One rail Roy kept back for no reason Sam could see except that a man may wish to save one token from an object that had once seemed to promise permanence. The green cloth, too worn for good play but too dear in memory to discard without a glance, he folded himself and laid in a crate among odds and ends not properly worth the space they took.

"Sentiment again?" Sam asked.

"History," Roy replied. "Mine, which is worse."

As the brothers packed and settled, the town came through their door in a steady stream for what remained to be purchased, consumed, argued over, or witnessed.

Some came only for last bargains. A miner bought two lamps for less than one would have cost a month before. A freighter took a coil of rope and three sacks of coffee on the spot, saying no man knew when next the road would make him such an offer. The Buckhorn proprietor sent over twice for bottles he had once declared too dear. A woman from the south line came for candles and left with a cheap blanket besides, on the sensible principle that one should buy before a merchant's floor turns to bare planks and regret.

Some came for cheap whiskey, having heard that Roy had no wish to carry every last bottle south if fair money or barter might spare the wagon. These were not all the best company. Men drank with the particular freedom that comes when a room is half disassembled and the proprietor no longer guards future order because the future itself is being loaded into crates.

And some came chiefly for final arguments.

There are men who cannot let another fellow leave without first nailing a meaning on his departure that flatters their own courage. Miller, of course, was one of these. He had held off two days, perhaps from calculation, perhaps from the hope that the Beans might yet soften or hedge or give him some smaller target than the plain fact of their going. But when the broken-down billiard frame lay stacked behind the counter and the crates stood marked for loading, he could deny it no longer.

He entered late in the afternoon, hat low, shoulders set, the very shape of a man who had come not to trade but to accuse.

The room was half stripped. Shelves showed gaps. A crate of lamps stood near the door. Roy was coiling line at the bar. Sam sat with the ledger open, though for once he had gone some time without writing in it.

"So it's true," Miller said.

"Yes," said Sam.

Miller looked round the room with exaggerated contempt.

"Fine holding. Fine talk. Fine courage from the men who told the rest of us to measure our steps."

Roy set down the coil.

"If you've come to buy, buy. If you've come to sneer, the merchandise is poor and much overstocked already."

Miller ignored him.

"I called it from the first. A merchant's nerve runs only so long as the till rings. Once that goes thin, down comes the great principle and off he rides."

Sam closed the ledger.

"There are men in this camp," he said, "who have shouted about standing while loading wagons behind their stores. If you mean to instruct me in consistency, choose another audience."

That landed, but not enough to satisfy Miller's temper.

"You leave now and every soul in these hills will take it for cowardice."

"No," Sam said. "Only you."

"And the road."

"The road thinks chiefly of axle weight and survival."

Miller stepped closer.

"A town's held by men willing to stake themselves."

Roy straightened fully then. The old impulse came on him hard—harder perhaps because the room stood half dismantled, because Miller had chosen his moment well, because nothing in a man stirs anger like being called a coward at the point he is trying hardest to act honestly. Roy felt it all at once: the wish to go over the bar, to take Miller by the collar, to beat from him in physical terms the distinction between pride and courage. For one hot instant the whole earlier Roy rose in him complete.

Sam saw it and spoke before the fuse touched powder.

"No."

It was only one word, but it stopped him.

Roy's jaw worked. He had not yet moved, but he stood right on the edge of it.

Miller saw that too and smiled the thin smile of a man who takes pleasure in having nearly set another fellow off.

"There," he said. "That's the spirit you should've used on the hills."

Roy took one step forward.

Sam stood up.

"The camp is watching how we leave," he said quietly, without turning to Roy, "and whether we go as men or as its last fools."

The words did what anger could not. Roy stopped.

The room held still. Even Miller, who had meant to provoke a scene and perhaps a fight, did not quite know what to do with refusal that did not taste of weakness.

At length Roy said, very evenly, "Buy your bottle or leave the room."

Miller looked from one brother to the other, saw nothing further to be gained in that moment, and threw a coin on the counter.

"One bottle, then. To remember you by."

Roy handed it across.

"You'll have your own memory soon enough," he said.

Miller took the bottle and went out with his shoulders stiffer than when he came.

Only after the door shut did Roy let out the breath he had been holding.

"I nearly gave him the satisfaction."

"Yes."

"I begin to dislike how often you're right."

Sam reopened the ledger.

"That only proves you are learning."

Among the objects yet unresolved was the cannon.

It had stood in Main Street so long that men had begun to think of it as part of the town's shape rather than as an odd piece of iron dragged into importance by fear and circumstance. It had thundered twice in the first great clash and thereafter served as reassurance, ornament, declaration, and argument all together. To some it symbolized Birchville's resolve. To others its absurdity. To Roy, at different hours, both.

The question of it came up when the Buckhorn proprietor asked whether the Beans meant to haul it south.

Roy laughed aloud at the thought.

"With what? Three mules, six saints, and the patience of Job?"

The man shrugged. "Some say it ought not be left idle if the camp's to hold."

"Then let the camp hold it," Sam said.

But the matter did not end there. A few of the hard men said the Beans had no claim to it now that the town still stood. Another argued it ought to be dragged before the Buckhorn if the Beans' place was being closed. Haskins, hearing this, said the cannon had already done more work as symbol than artillery and could likely serve the camp just as well planted atop a whiskey barrel if men were chiefly using it to admire themselves.

In the end the brothers settled the matter simply enough. The cannon would stay.

Not sold, not hauled, not fought over. Left in Birchville, where it had acquired meaning larger than any ownership could profitably untangle. Roy went out to look at it one last time in the afternoon light and stood with his hands in his coat pockets, hat tipped back, studying the old iron belly and rough timber bed.

"It belongs to the camp now," he said when Sam joined him.

"No," Sam said. "It belongs to the story the camp tells itself."

Roy smiled faintly.

"That is often the more durable property."

By the final evening the till held less than it had since their opening week.

Sam counted what remained in coin, dust, notes, and obligations reduced at last to portable form. He balanced the book, closed it, and set the key aside. There was no ceremony, though Roy, seeing him do it, stood a little straighter than before, as if marking inwardly the exact moment at which their business in Birchville ceased to be an ongoing venture and became a concluded chapter.

"Well?" Roy asked.

Sam looked at the closed till, then at the room.

"It is done."

Roy nodded once.

Together they boarded what must be boarded. The front windows were covered from within more for protection than secrecy. Remaining shelves were stripped. The counter cleared except for what they would carry in the morning. A mattress was dragged into the front room because neither brother intended to sleep in the rear among the crates on that last night. The place looked neither dead nor alive, but suspended—like a room waiting to learn what sort of silence follows habit.

Supper that night was cold meat, bread, and coffee at the rear table amid packed goods and broken-down fittings. Neither man spoke much while eating. The day had been too full of figures, voices, sales, accusations, and small inward reckonings.

Later, when only one lamp remained burning low at the front, Roy sat on the edge of the dismantled billiard frame and looked round the room.

"Well," he said at last, "Pinos Altos has instructed me beyond my wishes."

"Birchville," Sam corrected.

Roy smiled in the dim.

"Does it matter now which name a man uses when he's leaving?"

"Yes," Sam said. "One is what men called it when they believed discovery made it theirs. The other is what the country was before they came."

Roy rested his elbows on his knees.

"There you are again. Always bringing the room down to bedrock."

"If the floor gives way otherwise, bedrock is useful."

Roy looked toward the shuttered windows.

"I thought when we came here that a camp was a thing to be mastered—by trade, by nerve, by being a little quicker than the next fellow at seeing what men wanted and selling it back with style."

"And now?"

Roy considered.

"Now I think a camp is mostly appetite looking for excuses. Gold makes one. Fear makes another. Pride makes the last and worst."

Sam sat across from him on a crate of lamp oil and folded his hands.

"That is better than most learn."

Roy gave him a sidelong look.

"Do not praise me too hard. It may spoil the improvement."

Sam almost smiled.

After a time Roy said, "Do you regret coming?"

Sam did not answer at once.

"No," he said finally. "Regret is for acts that taught nothing worth the cost. This place taught plenty."

"And what did it teach you?"

"That a man may count accurately and still arrive in wrong country. That not every profitable chance is rightful. That warning ignored turns into reckoning. And that leaving in time is a more difficult skill than arriving bold."

Roy turned that over.

"And me?" he asked finally. "What do you think it taught me?"

Sam looked at him in the low lamplight.

"That performance is not command."

Roy accepted even that.

The lamp hissed softly. Outside, the wind moved once through the pines and then went still. Somewhere in the Buckhorn a chair scraped and then all was quiet again.

At length Roy rose, crossed to the bar, and laid his hand on the worn edge where countless glasses had rung and countless lies been told with more grace than truth.

"It was a good room," he said.

"Yes."

"For a while."

"Yes."

Roy turned back.

"That may be the truest thing of most places."

Before sleeping, they walked once more through the empty front room, checking boards, crates, straps, and the door. Then Sam put out the lamp and left only darkness, the smell of wood, dust, stale whiskey, and lamp smoke—the mixed perfume of a frontier room that had tried, in its own small way, to become an institution before learning it was only a chapter.

There, on their last night in the store at Birchville, with the till closed, the windows boarded, the cannon left in the street, and the road waiting just beyond the dark, the brothers lay down among the remnants of their own undertaking and listened to the mountain hold its silence.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Out of Pinos Altos

They were up before first light.

No man who means to leave a town cleanly after having lived much of himself in it sleeps late on the morning of departure. The body may be tired enough, but the mind, knowing what waits, rises long before the hand does. So it was with Sam and Roy Bean. They had lain in darkness through the last quiet hours in the boarded room, hearing now and then the shifting of the wind, the faint ring of tack from the horse line, and once the cough of a sentry moving in Main Street. Yet sleep had come to neither in any full or easy measure.

When the eastern dark began to soften, Sam was already on his feet.

He moved without wasted motion. Coffee first, quick and black. Then straps, buckles, crates, and the final lifting of goods from room to wagon. He had made the order of it all the day before and the day before that, so the morning labor was less a fresh undertaking than the execution of a plan long prepared. Flour and coffee low and centered. Powder separated. Bottles packed deep in straw. Tools where they could be reached. Rope and canvas outermost. The better lamps tied to ride without breakage if the road proved rough below the ridge. Saddles checked. Harness checked again.

Roy came somewhat later out of the gray half-light of the front room, hat in hand, hair not yet smoothed, carrying the folded piece of green billiard cloth under one arm.

"You are sentimental before dawn," Sam said.

Roy glanced at the cloth and then at the wagon.

"No. Merely unreasonable in one small article."

"There is little room left for unreasonable articles."

Roy tucked the cloth into the rear of the wagon anyway.

"Then it must travel as memory instead of cargo."

Sam let it go.

The door came open at last, and cold air entered the place one final time. Birchville lay before them in that hour with all its harshness softened only by distance and dawn. Smoke had not yet begun to rise from every chimney. The ridges above stood black against a paling sky. Frost silvered wagon tongues and the ruts of Main Street. The old cannon sat where they had left it, iron-dark and mute in the center of the road, no longer theirs and not quite the town's either, but fixed there as part relic, part boast, part witness.

Together they drew the wagon out and loaded the last of the goods. Two pack animals stood saddled and ready with what the wagon could not comfortably bear. Roy went back inside once, came out with the final bottle from the shelf, looked at it in the growing light, and then set it wordlessly in the Buckhorn crate they had agreed to leave behind. That done, he shut the door and laid the bar across it from outside.

There was no speech over the threshold.

The work had said enough.

By then the camp had begun to stir.

A woman from the south line, shawl over her head against the cold, paused with a water bucket in hand and watched them without comment. A freighter crossing toward the horse line stopped, shifted his gloves, and nodded once. At the Buckhorn the proprietor himself appeared in the doorway rubbing sleep from his eyes and stood looking out as if the morning had arrived carrying an expected blow. He raised one hand in acknowledgment but did not come over. Whether pride, decency, or fatigue held him where he was could not be said.

They set out just as the sun touched the upper tips of the pines.

The wagon creaked once, settled under its load, and rolled forward. The pack animals followed. Sam walked beside the near wheel at first to feel how the weight rode. Roy mounted, then dismounted again almost at once for no reason except that riding away proved harder than he had expected and walking gave him the illusion of less finality.

They passed first the place where Farnham's store had stood shut and crooked since his leaving. Then the dark cabin of the family that had gone south in daylight. Then the walls still scarred from the old attack, the black streaking weathered now but not erased. Guarded cabins watched them with fresh-cut loopholes like tired eyes. At one porch a child stood barefoot in the chill until his mother drew him back inside.

The graves above the creek came next.

They were not so fresh as when first shoveled, but the earth still showed darker there than the ground about it, and the little rise on which they lay had that particular dignity of frontier burying places—plain, exposed, and honest in a way finer churchyards often are not. Sam removed his hat as they passed. Roy did the same.

Neither spoke.

After the graves came the Buckhorn.

It still stood broad and thick-walled, the nearest thing Birchville possessed to assurance. Its upper room windows caught the stronger light. Smoke was beginning to rise from its kitchen chimney. The proprietor stood out front now fully dressed, one hand on the post, his face unreadable.

"Well," he called, not loudly, "there goes good coffee and half the decent tobacco in camp."

Roy paused and looked over.

"You had your chance to buy more."

"I had my chance to leave too," the man answered.

For a moment no one said anything after that.

Then Roy inclined his head.

"Keep the bottle," he said. "For a fair memory if you can manage one."

The Buckhorn man grunted. Whether it meant thanks or merely receipt, Roy could not tell.

Farther down Main Street a few other townsmen had gathered. Not many. Birchville had never become a place of ceremonious farewells. But enough stood there to mark the going.

Haskins was among them, hat low, rifle in the crook of one arm from habit more than need. Ortega stood a little apart, blanket around his shoulders, expression sober. The blacksmith had come out with his apron still hanging from one side, as if he had meant only to look a moment and then return to the forge. Two younger miners watched from beside the horse line with that strained boldness men adopt when uncertain whether to shame a leaver or envy him.

Miller stood nearest the cannon.

He had clearly not meant to be absent from this hour. His face was set hard, his shoulder long since freed but remembered still in the way he held himself. When the wagon drew level he said, "So that's it."

Sam did not turn his head.

"Yes."

Miller gave a short laugh with no mirth in it.

"Well. The road's wide enough for merchants."

Before Sam could answer, Roy did. But there was no anger in it now, only tired plainness.

"And the camp, it seems, is wide enough for speeches."

That silenced more than Miller. Haskins looked down and almost smiled.

One of the younger miners called after them, "You'll hear when we strike it rich and hold the place yet."

Roy half-turned in the road and answered, "I hope you do."

It was not mockery, and perhaps because it was not, no reply came.

They passed the north breastwork last and the horse lines drawn close behind it. Beyond lay the road up toward the rise from which the whole camp could be seen at once below the pines. Roy looked back almost at once, then again after another hundred yards, as though repeated glances might soften the fact of distance opening between himself and the place.

Sam did not look back at all.

He walked with one hand on the wagon side, watching the ruts, the wheel, the animals, the line of the road. He had the look of a man who knows that the hardest part of departure is often the first quarter mile and is determined to get through it without indulgence.

Roy noticed.

"You might look behind, if only to prove yourself human."

Sam answered, "I know what is behind."

"Yes, but sight has its uses."

"So does restraint."

Roy smiled faintly to himself and turned in the saddle once more.

The camp below looked already a little different from even that short remove. Smaller. Closer in upon itself. The walls, wagon beds, and sacks that from within had seemed busy makeshifts now gave the whole place the appearance of something half military and half improvised against its will. Smoke rose from a few chimneys. The Buckhorn stood out broad and stubborn in the middle line. The cannon was a black dot in Main Street. The empty places showed more plainly from above—the dark cabins, the closed fronts, the spaces between buildings where confidence had once rushed to fill and now could not.

At the last rise Sam halted the wagon.

He did so partly for the team, partly because the slope required a breath, and partly because some acts ought not be denied entirely even by men who pride themselves on plainness.

From there they could see the whole camp.

Pinos Altos—Birchville—whatever name a man chose in that hour—still stood. It had not been erased. It had not vanished into the mountain as if history were so quick to correct ambition. Cabins remained. Smoke rose. Men moved small in the street. The Buckhorn endured. The graves lay on their rise. The walls and works still showed. The road in and the road out were both visible.

Roy sat very still in the saddle.

"It does not look beaten," he said.

"No," Sam answered. "Not in the way men usually mean."

Roy kept his eyes on the place.

"It looks… diminished."

"Yes."

"And guarded."

"Yes."

"And yet not gone."

"No."

For a little while they simply looked.

Then Sam said, "A town may endure without prevailing."

Roy turned that over.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I believe that is true."

He looked again at the little camp beneath the tall pines and saw now, perhaps more clearly than ever before, what would never make its way into the bright clean legends men later prefer to tell. He saw not merely a frontier town clinging bravely to fortune, but a settlement raised too quickly on land already known by others, held together by appetite, fear, noise, and the labor of men and women whose names would not all be remembered. He saw the graves. The burned walls. The drawn-in horse lines. The guarded cabins. The Buckhorn striving to be both sanctuary and performance. The cannon as symbol because symbols cost less than wisdom until the bill comes due. He saw too the unseen things: families in the timber, winter stores burned by pride, roads turned uncertain, merchants counting losses, miners learning too late what price the hills asked.

Frontier legend, he understood then, leaves out more than it tells. It leaves out fear. It leaves out trespass. It leaves out the cost carried by those who had the country first and by those foolish enough to think a stake in the ground or a room of whiskey and billiards could alter the older truth beneath their boots.

He said quietly, "There's not much room in the fine stories for what a place really charges."

Sam looked at him sidelong.

"No."

"And yet men will tell them anyway."

"Yes."

Roy drew a breath of the pine-cold air and let it out.

"Well," he said, "they may tell theirs. I know mine better now."

Sam put a hand to the wagon wheel.

"That is something."

Roy looked one last time at the camp below.

Then, with no flourish, no farewell wave, and no backward speech to soften the act, the brothers turned the team south and took the road down from the rise.

Behind them Pinos Altos remained—smaller, guarded, uncertain, but not gone. The camp would go on a while yet in its own hard fashion. More men would come perhaps, and more would leave. Walls would stand or fail. Claims would be struck or abandoned. The Buckhorn would keep its doors. The graves would take weather. The mountain would remain what it had always been, indifferent to the difference men drew between endurance and success.

Ahead of them lay the road, the lower country, and whatever chapters waited beyond the tall pines.

They did not look back again.

And so the Beans rode out of Pinos Altos, leaving behind not a story neatly ended, but one still living in fear, ambition, memory, and unresolved claim—such as frontier histories most often are when they are told true.

EPILOGUE

Sam Bean and Roy Bean rode out of Pinos Altos while the town was still more question than answer.

Their roads afterward proved as different as their natures had always suggested. Samuel G. Bean returned toward the Rio Grande country and the steadier world of settlement, land, and public responsibility. County history later identified him with Doña Ana County, where he had served as sheriff in 1861, and he remained tied to the Las Cruces world in the years that followed. He died in Las Cruces in 1903, leaving behind a quieter history than his brother, but no less real. Roy Bean went on into Texas and into the larger, stranger legend that would one day gather around his name. He married Virginia Chávez in 1866, had four children, and in 1882 moved west with the railroad camps toward the Pecos. On August 2 of that year he was appointed justice of the peace in Pecos County, beginning the career that made him famous as the "Law West of the Pecos." He later settled at Langtry, served for years as a notorious frontier judge, retired in 1902, and died in 1903, the same year as Sam.

Pinos Altos, however, did not end with the Beans' departure.

The camp endured. After the worst of the early violence, protection came in the form of Fort Bayard, established in 1866 to protect the mining district. Under that harder shelter, the old camp survived its first raw and dangerous season and gradually became something larger and more permanent than the frightened settlement the Beans had known. The Spanish name prevailed over Birchville. Pinos Altos became Grant County's first county seat, and later mining booms carried it far beyond the first anxious line of cabins beneath the pines.

Then, in time, it diminished again.

Such is the history of many western towns. They do not disappear at once. They enlarge, harden, flourish, narrow, and fade by degrees, passing through several lives while later memory tries to compress them into one. Pinos Altos survived its first bitter years, expanded into a larger mining community, and only gradually declined in the early twentieth century as the great force of its boom years passed.

At the center of that surviving memory stands the Buckhorn.

The Buckhorn Saloon remains in Pinos Altos today, one of the town's best-known landmarks and one of the places through which its nineteenth-century life may still be felt. The Opera House that stands beside it now is not the original one from the old camp days. It was rebuilt in 1969 using materials from other structures in town, carrying forward the memory of the place in another form, as frontier towns often carry themselves forward—by salvage, reinvention, and the persistence of local memory.

So the story did not end when Sam and Roy rode south.

Pinos Altos remained behind them—hardened, altered, enlarged, diminished, and remembered. It endured, though endurance was never the same thing as triumph. Roy went on toward legend. Sam toward Las Cruces and quieter history. The town itself passed through more than one life, as towns of that kind do.

And beneath the tall pines, the mountain kept the longer memory of all of them.

HISTORICAL NOTE

Beneath the Tall Pines is a work of historical fiction inspired by the early gold-camp history of Birchville, later known as Pinos Altos, New Mexico. The novel draws on the documented presence of Samuel G. Bean and Roy Bean in the camp, the early gold discovery on Bear Creek, and the violent tensions that arose when miners and merchants entered land long known and inhabited by the Apache.

In writing this story, I have tried to remain faithful to the larger historical truths of the place while allowing fiction to give voice to its daily life, its fears, its ambitions, and its moral conflicts. Sam Bean and Roy Bean were real men. So too were figures such as Robert H. Birch, Jacob Snively, James Hicks, Mangas Coloradas, and Cochise, all of whom belong to the larger historical world surrounding early Pinos Altos.

At the same time, many of the camp characters in this novel—miners, merchants, freighters, gamblers, laborers, women of the camp, and townspeople—are fictional creations. They were shaped to represent the kinds of people who would have lived, worked, argued, hoped, and suffered in such a place.

This novel does not present the Apache as villains. Their resistance is portrayed as the defense of homeland, water, timber, movement, and survival against intrusion. That understanding is essential to the history of Pinos Altos and to any honest telling of the frontier Southwest.

The later history of Pinos Altos continued long after the Bean brothers left. The town endured, hardened under military protection, expanded into a larger mining community, and only gradually declined in the early twentieth century. The Buckhorn Saloon remains today as one of the town's best-known landmarks, and the Opera House, rebuilt in 1969 using materials from other structures in town, still helps preserve the memory of old Pinos Altos.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have long been drawn to the history of the desert Southwest—its mountain camps, its weathered churches, its roads of dust and memory, and the people who tried to build lives in places that asked much of them. Pinos Altos is one of those places. It is beautiful, storied, and layered with more than one history.

This novel began with my desire to imagine the early days of Birchville and Pinos Altos not merely as a tale of gold and frontier daring, but as a human story shaped by conflicting hopes, flawed men, fragile settlements, and the deeper truth that the land was never empty.

I was especially interested in Roy Bean before the legend, and in Sam Bean as the steadier, more practical counterweight to him. Between those two brothers, I found a way to explore not just frontier commerce and survival, but conscience, pride, and the difficult wisdom of knowing when to leave.

If this novel has done anything well, I hope it has honored both the place and the people whose lives were touched by it.

ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

While this novel is rooted in real history, readers may wish to know which central figures are historical and which are fictionalized.

The historical figures in the novel include Samuel G. Bean, Roy Bean, Robert H. Birch, Jacob Snively, James Hicks, Mangas Coloradas, and Cochise.

Most of the camp-level characters were created for the story, including miners, merchants, freighters, gamblers, laborers, women of the camp, and townspeople such as Miller, Haskins, Ortega, Briscoe, Veale, Kearney, Delaney, Farnham, Pritchard, Mercer, Tate, Lunn, Pike, and the Buckhorn proprietor as portrayed in the novel.

These fictional characters were created to represent the kinds of people who would have inhabited an early mining camp like Pinos Altos.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks go to all who have preserved the history of Pinos Altos, New Mexico, and to those whose research, records, and local memory have kept alive the story of this mountain town.

I am also grateful for the enduring witness of places like the Buckhorn Saloon and Opera House, which help the past remain visible in the present.

And with special gratitude, I thank my wife, Ginny, whose companionship, encouragement, and shared love of meaningful places continue to bless my life and work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenny Sallee in the Pinos Altos Opera House, Valentine's Day 2024. Photo by Ginny Sallee.

Kenny Sallee, ThM, is a writer of historical fiction, devotional writing, and faith-centered reflections rooted in the landscapes and history of the American Southwest. He is especially drawn to stories of endurance, memory, frontier faith, and the moral complexity of life in places shaped by beauty and hardship.

ALSO BY KENNY SALLEE

Fiction

Miss Ginny of Sundance Ranch

Beyond the Porch Light

Beneath the Tall Pines

Other Writing

Devotional and inspirational works

Historical and reflective writing set in the Southwest

A NOTE TO THE READER

Thank you for reading Beneath the Tall Pines. If this story has stirred your interest in the history of Pinos Altos, I hope you will continue exploring the real town, its people, and the layered history of the Southwest.